Russian Folktales

Retold by
Aradhan

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Introduction

Growing up in the eighties, in a small hill town at the foothills of the Himalayas, reading was our primary source of entertainment and a much anticipated pleasure. In those days, books were hard to come by and we read whatever we could get our hands on. Very often, these were an eclectic collection of books left by the British in the old colonial forest rest houses we spent our holidays in. Then, in our never-ending quest for new reading material, we came across book stalls in the local market that sold Russian books. Among the plethora of books translated into English was a vast collection of Russian folktales for children. Plunging into that treasure trove I discovered a world that impacted and influenced my literary choices for many years to come.

These tales and their exquisite illustrations by Ivan Bilibin, Egor Yershov, Ksenia Yershova, A. Kurkin, to name a few, drew me into a universe that was strange but fascinating. Even today, when I revisit these stories, I am reminded of my childhood spent sitting on a veranda surrounded by pine trees, reading the afternoon away, lost in the dense forest of fantasy.

In Russia, a tale is called 'skazka'. This word comes from

the same root as the verb 'to say'—so a skazka is simply 'something spoken'. The Russian word 'narodnye' means 'of the people', or 'folk', or 'popular'. Thus, Russkie narodnye skazki or Russian folktales are an oral tradition, the very first stories of a people. Like folklore all around the world, they express the hopes, dreams, fears, hardships, religious and cultural beliefs of the people. Over centuries, a single story was retold by generations of storytellers. Depending on the storytellers, their social and psychological context, these tales changed and evolved, acquiring several layers.

Russian folktales are peopled with many unique characters, the most iconic being Baba Yaga, the quintessential witch who has a penchant for eating children. Many years were to pass before I was to learn that she was not quite what she seemed. Though she threatens to cook her visitors for supper, she eventually offers them invaluable guidance and wisdom. Most protagonists, in fact, actively seek her for answers to impossible riddles or quests in the journey of life, love and death. Baba Yaga is a powerful feminine force of nature—she controls day and night, the moon and the sun. A grand matriarch, she is a law unto herself.

Koshchei the Deathless, another prominent character, is notorious for kidnapping mothers, wives and maidens, and for holding them prisoner in his palace. He travels on a warhorse which aids its master with clairvoyance, or else he

journeys in the form of a whirlwind. He is a powerful wizard who gains immortality by hiding his soul outside his physical body. Much like the Russian nested Matyushka dolls, it resides in a needle in an egg which is in a duck which is in a hare which is in a box which is inside an iron chest which is buried under a green oak tree which is located in an island on the wide ocean.

In Russian tales, oftentimes, women are strong independent characters. Instead of waiting to be rescued by a knight in shining armour, they go on quests to seek the hero, like the maiden in 'The Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon'. There are warrior queens like Marya Morevna, or powerful sorceresses like Vasilisa the Wise, or ordinary girls enduring their oppressive external circumstances, but with pluck, patience and humility.

And who is averse to the lazy charm of Ivan, the hero of most tales?! A prince or peasant, so long as he is the hero, is called Ivan. He is a lazy good-for-nothing fool who lolls around the warm hearth for days, maybe even years. But once he gets started there's no stopping him. He has a sense of oneness with the natural world, and his lack of cunning and naïveté takes him forward. He goes with the flow of things, and his inherent compassion comes to his rescue when he finds himself in tricky situations. At times, he just gets lucky as destiny contrives to aid him, very often in humorous ways.

In these tales, there is a sense of harmony and reverence for natural phenomena like trees, water, fire, thunder, birds, frost, cyclical seasons of sowing and harvesting. Animals and birds talk freely with humans and help them.

What the Brothers' Grimm did for German fairy tales, nineteenth-century Russian folklorist, Alexander Afanasyev, did for Russian folktales. He recorded and published over six hundred folktales, the most substantial collection of folktales by any one man in the world. Some other prominent collectors were Vladimir Dahl, Ivan Khudiakov, E.A. Chudinsky and A.A. Erlenvein. Some travelled on foot through the countryside collecting stories and sayings, and some became acquainted with them from local women in their hometown. Their collections are highly valuable as they revealed for the first time the richness of Russian culture and folk belief and inspired great writers like Pushkin, Tolstoy, Stravinsky, to name a few. Later, folktales became the main channel for subversive literature, which used 'Aesopian language' to express that which could not be expressed directly.

Russian folktales, whether they tell of animals, everyday life, heroes and villains, magic or love, are full of adventure, wonder and examples of courage. This collection will open a door for readers into a fascinating new world from where they can find their way to more.

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there once lived a merchant and his wife. They had been married for twelve years and had a lovely daughter named Vasilisa.

When Vasilisa was eight years old, her mother fell sick and it seemed that she would not recover. She called Vasilisa to her bedside and, tucking her curl behind her ear, said, 'Dear child, before I die, there is something I want to give you,' and she placed a little wooden doll in Vasilisa's hand. 'Take this doll as my blessings. If anything bad happens to you, give it something to eat and drink and ask it for guidance. But be careful, don't tell anyone about it.'

Shortly afterwards she died.

Seasons passed, the birch tree turned the colour of flame and then, one day, all its leaves were covered with snow. Vasilisa and her father grieved for many days. Then when new leaves appeared on trees and rivers melted and birdsong was in the air, Vasilisa's father decided to remarry. 'It would do Vasilisa good to have a mother too,' he thought. There was no dearth of proposals for him as he was a good man, and wealthy as well. He chose a widow who had two daughters a little older than Vasilisa. But from the moment the stepmother and her daughters came into the house, they were cruel and nasty to Vasilisa as they were very envious of her beauty. They gave her difficult tasks to perform hoping that toil would make her thin and worn-out, and the sun and wind would burn and blemish her delicate skin.

Vasilisa's beauty, however, never dimmed, and she grew lovelier with each passing day, white like milk and red like blood. But her stepsisters, with all the comforts and means at hand, grew as plain and homely as common crows. Every night, after everyone had gone to their rooms to sleep, Vasilisa would lock her door and take out her little wooden doll from her pocket. She would give her some food and say, 'There, my little kukla, eat a little, drink a little, and listen to my grief. I miss my mother sorely, and my stepmother

hates me and wishes I was dead! Tell me, what shall I do? How should I behave?'

The doll's eyes would light up like fireflies, and it would suddenly come alive. It would eat and drink and look tenderly at Vasilisa. 'Don't cry, I am here now. You are stronger than you realise. We will finish all the tasks tomorrow. Lie down now and close your eyes. Morning is wiser than evening.'

So Vasilisa would lie down, feel comforted and go to sleep. In the morning, she would finish all the tasks with the doll's help. The doll even told her how to make, from a certain herb, an ointment which prevented sunburn.

Time passed and Vasilisa and her stepsisters came of marriageable age. Suitors from near and far came to ask for Vasilisa's hand. No one was interested in the stepsisters, so plain and ill-tempered they were. This fuelled the stepmother's anger even further, and she sent every gallant youth packing. 'Shoo! Go away!' she would say to them. 'First my daughters will be married, and only then will Vasilisa be wed!' Then she would take out all her jealousy and spite on Vasilisa and make her work even harder, and rebuke and reprimand her.

It so happened that one day the merchant had to go to a distant town on work. He was barely out of sight when his wife sold the house, packed all their belongings

and moved with the three girls to another dwelling far from the village, at the edge of a dark forest.

The stepmother knew that deep in the heart of this forest stood a wooden hut on chicken legs where lived the great and terrible witch grandmother—Baba Yaga. She was the mistress of magic, and if you annoyed her she would have you for supper.

Every day the stepmother sent Vasilisa near the forest on one errand or another, either to find a flower or gather berries or firewood. She secretly hoped that one day Vasilisa would accidentally stray into the little hut and be devoured by Baba Yaga. But every day Vasilisa came home safe and sound for her doll showed her where to go and where not to stray.

One evening, the stepmother called the three girls to her. She gave each one a task to do—one to make a lace tablecloth, another to knit a pair of stockings, and the third, Vasilisa, to weave a shawl. They had to finish their tasks before the night was over.

The girls started to do their work under the light of a single lamp and the mother went to sleep. Many hours passed. Suddenly the wick in the lamp spluttered and one of the daughters went to straighten it. Then, as her mother had instructed her, she snuffed it out.

'Oh no! The candle is out,' she exclaimed. 'What do we do now? There is a hut in the forest that has light.

One of us will have to go there and get it. It does not have to be me for I can see my needles in the dark.'

'Not me either,' said the first sister. 'I can see my lace pins in the dark.'

They looked at Vasilisa and told her to go and get the light.

Vasilisa walked to the forest. It was a dark night and the trees seemed to stand around her like a fortress. She entered and was cut off from the world outside. Her heart was thumping; she did not know where to go. Then she took out her doll, fed it some food and asked it to guide her. The doll said, 'Be bold, be brave, young Vasilisa! This may be your final test. I am with you and will guide you, and together we will get through this dark night.' It told her what path to follow, and slowly Vasilisa inched her way in, stumbling sometimes on gnarled roots and rocks but picking herself up and moving on.

No one can tell if she walked a short way or a long one, the telling is easy, the journey hard. As she trudged along, suddenly, out of nowhere, a rider came toward her. He was a sight to behold! Dressed all in white, he sat atop a white steed, his face radiating white light. As he passed, the first light of dawn appeared in the sky, the forest stirred from its slumber, birds chirped and Vasilisa felt fresh and bright.

The air was still chilly as Vasilisa walked on, and her hair was wet with dew. She thought about her mother as she made her lone journey. Her hands sought out her little doll and rested gently upon it. She wondered who lived in the hut and whether they would be kind. Suddenly she was jerked out of her reverie by the sound of hooves clattering towards her. When the horseback rider came closer, she saw that the rider, his horse, his clothes and harness were all a deep red. As he passed, the sun rose in the sky, and Vasilisa felt warm and dry. A new energy surged within her. She was very curious about the horsemen and how they came to be in the forest.

Vasilisa walked on. Evening came and still there was no hut in sight. Daylight faded, the forest was filled with shadows, an owl hooted somewhere in the distance. She brushed past an old birch and its branches reached out to touch her face. She ran on and came to a clearing and finally, before her she saw the hut. The hut stood on chicken legs and was slowly rotating. It was surrounded by a fence made of human bones and high up on each pole of the fence, dangled a human skull. The lock on the gate was a sharp set of teeth in a huge human jaw, grinning maliciously. Vasilisa shivered with fright and stood transfixed.

She stood there not knowing what to do when suddenly another horseback rider passed by. He was

dressed in black from head to toe and sat upon a horse the colour of midnight. As he passed, night fell, and Vasilisa caught a flash of a twinkle in his eyes. He rode up to the hut and vanished from sight. The night deepened and the skulls began to glow with light.

The trees started heaving and moaning, thunder roared and lightening flashed. Vasilisa looked up and saw a huge iron mortar flying towards her. Inside it sat a skeleton-thin old woman pushing a gigantic pestle and sweeping away her tracks with a long silver birch broom. The mortar came to a halt beside Vasilisa, and the hag thrust her face into Vasilisa's. Her nose was long and curved, her teeth sharp and pointed. Her wispy grey hair fell around her shoulders, and her eyes were intense and penetrating. Vasilisa noticed that the storm had abated as suddenly as it had started.

She realised then that this was Baba Yaga, the enchantress that people spoke of. She wished she would live to tell her tale!

'Who are you, young girl, and how do you dare come to my domain?' thundered Baba Yaga.

Vasilisa swallowed. 'I am Vasilisa,' she said. 'I have been sent by my stepmother's daughters to borrow light from you.' She clutched the doll inside her pocket. 'May I please take it?'

'You may,' replied Baba Yaga. 'But first you have

to work for me. If you do all that I say, I will give you a light. If not, I will have to eat you!' And turning to her hut she shrieked, 'Little hut, be still. Turn your back to the forest and your front to me.' The hut screeched to a halt and turned around. The jaws unlocked, the gate swung open and Baba Yaga rode in. Vasilisa followed and the gate banged shut and the jaw snapped tight behind her.

Inside the hut, Baba Yaga threw herself down next to the stove, stretched out her bony legs, and said, 'I am famished. Rustle up some supper for me and, mind you, it better be good or I will make a tasty morsel out of you!'

Vasilisa ran around the hut. She roasted meat, baked fresh bread, brought out wine and kvass from the cellar, mixed some blueberries and sour cream together, and served the old woman everything on a platter. Baba Yaga ate heartily, enjoying every bit. She left some cabbage soup and a breadcrust for Vasilisa to eat.

'Tomorrow,' she instructed Vasilisa, 'you must clean the house, sweep the yard, fetch water from the well and firewood from the forest, brush my mares and prepare me a delicious meal. Then,' she added, 'go to my granary, take a sack of wheat and remove the chaff from it. If you don't complete all the tasks, I will cook you for dinner.'

After that she lay down to sleep and began to snore loudly.

Vasilisa took her doll out of her pocket, gave her something to eat and said, 'Dear kukla, please help me. Baba Yaga has given me impossible chores to do. If I fail, she will eat me.'

The doll comforted Vasilisa and said, 'Go to sleep now Vasilisa, it is late. Mornings are wiser than evenings.'

Vasilisa lay down and was asleep in a flash. When she awoke next morning, the hut was empty. Baba Yaga had already left. She looked around. Everything was clean, the water fetched, firewood chopped, the mares brushed, and even the wheat separated from the chaff. The doll lay in her pocket quietly. Vasilisa was thrilled, and sent a silent word of gratitude to her little wooden friend. Then she freshened up, ate, gathered wild flowers from the path outside. The hut was revolving slowly, and she drowsed the afternoon away. When she awoke it was evening, and she began to prepare supper for her host.

When night fell, a terrible gale arose, and Vasilisa knew that Baba Yaga was returning on her mortar and pestle.

Baba Yaga entered the hut and looked around. Everything looked and smelled fresh and nice. There

were flowers in a vase, and the smell of cooking made her mouth water. It seemed that the girl had done her tasks.

'Well done, Vasilisa. The house and yard are clean, but where is the wheat?'

Vasilisa took her to the granary. When Baba Yaga had checked it carefully, she clapped her hands and shouted, 'Come, my faithful servants! Come quickly and grind my wheat!' Immediately three pairs of hands appeared, seized the measure of wheat and carried it away.

As she ate Baba Yaga told Vasilisa, 'Tomorrow too, you must do all the household chores *and* weave some yarn. Then go to my storehouse, pick a sack of poppy seeds and clean them one by one. Some mischief-maker has mixed dirt in them to spite me, and I want you to make them absolutely clean. If you fail, remember, either I will dine on you, or your head will be on a stake in my fence!'

Vasilisa again asked her tiny doll to help, and the next day they got everything ready together, completed all the tasks and prayed that Baba Yaga would be happy.

When the witches' grandmother returned that night, she went all around the hut, tapping with her pestle, looking underneath the table, flicking her index finger on surfaces, checking for dust. But pry and examine as much as she liked, she could find no reason to fault Vasilisa.

She clapped her hands and shouted, 'Come, my trusted servants! Press the oil out of my poppy seeds!' Instantly three pairs of hands appeared, seized the measure of poppy seeds and carried it away.

That night, after she had eaten, Baba Yaga said, 'Tomorrow, take one of the skulls from the fence outside and go.'

Vasilisa, sitting in a corner, staring at the glowing embers in the stove, nodded. She raised her head as if to speak, then looked down again.

Baba Yaga looked at her and said, 'What is it, girl? Speak out.'

Vasilisa said, 'Grandmother, may I ask you something?'

'Ask if you want. But remember, too much knowledge before your time does not make you wise, and some questions have answers that you may not like.'

Vasilisa hesitated, then said, 'On my way here I saw a horseman who was dressed in white. Who was he?

'He was my Rising Dawn,' replied Baba Yaga.

'Then I saw a second horseman dressed in red,' continued Vasilisa. 'Who was he?'

'He was my Bright Day,' Baba Yaga replied.

'Then I saw a third horse rider dressed in midnight-black. Tell me, babyshka, who was he?' asked Vasilisa.

'That was my Black Night,' answered Baba Yaga. 'These horsemen are all loyal servants of mine. Do you have more questions to ask? Would you like to know who the three pairs of hands were? Or whose skulls decorate my poles?'

Vasilisa, wise as she was brave, recalled the Baba's words and kept silent.

After a pause she said, 'The three questions were enough for me. Knowing overmuch does not make you any wiser.'

'Well said, girl,' said Baba Yaga, her eyes sparkling. 'Now I have a question for you. Tell me, how were you able to, in such a short time, perfectly accomplish all the tasks I gave you?'

Vasilisa thought about the doll in her pocket, her mother's precious legacy, and answered, 'I am helped by my mother's love and blessing.'

This answer made Baba Yaga spring up. She had been tricked! She chased Vasilisa out of her house, screaming behind her, 'Get out this moment! I won't have blessed daughters in my house.'

Baba Yaga unlocked the gate, grabbed a skull with burning eyes, threw it at Vasilisa and said, 'Here, take this fire and give it to your stepmother.' Then she stomped back to her stove and stretched out beside it.

Vasilisa put the skull on the end of a stick and ran

through the forest, stumbling and falling, seeing her way by the skull's glowing eyes, and finally came out of it.

When she reached her stepmother's house, she was, to her great surprise, welcomed warmly for the first time ever. Since she had been gone, there had been no light or fire in the house. The fire they brought from the neighbours would go out as soon as they carried it over the threshold. There was nothing to eat and the house was like an ice-box.

As the stepmother greedily reached out for the skull, its eyes began to glimmer and glow like red-hot coals. Before she could move away, a flame leaped out of the skull and enveloped her and set her on fire. Her daughters ran and tried to hide, but the flame followed them everywhere and burned them too. Nothing was left of them but three heaps of ash on the floor. Only Vasilisa was left unharmed.

When the skull's fire had diminished, Vasilisa took the skull and buried it into a deep hole in the ground.

Then she set out for the village nearby, where she found lodgings with an old woman who was poor and childless. She stayed with her for many days, waiting for her father to return from the faraway town.

She wanted to help the woman, so one day she told her, 'Go and buy me the finest flax you can find.'

The old woman did as she was told, and Vasilisa wove with it the most exquisite linen cloth. It was fine and smooth, soft and white. Then she said to the old woman, 'Take the linen to the market and sell it to the highest bidder. You have been kind to me, I want you to keep the money.'

When the old woman examined the linen, she said, 'This linen is far too superior to be hawked in the bazaar. It is fit only for the tsar, and tomorrow I shall take it to his palace.'

Next day, the old woman went to the tsar's splendid palace. She stood under his window, and when he saw her, he asked, 'What do you want, old woman?'

'O Tsar,' the old woman answered, 'I have brought a wonderful piece of linen for you, and I want you to have it!'

The tsar ordered his guards to bring her before him, and when he saw the linen he was very impressed. 'What will you take for it, old woman?' he asked.

'It is priceless, batyushka,' she answered. 'I have brought it to you as a gift.'

The tsar thanked the old woman, took the linen and sent her home with many rich presents.

Many tailors were called to make a shirt for the tsar out of the linen cloth, but it was so fine that no one was deft and skillful enough to sew it. So at last, the tsar sent for the

old woman. 'Babyshka, since it was you who wove a cloth so fine, you must also know how to sew it,' he said.

'No, Your Majesty, it was not I who wove the linen. It is the work of a girl I gave shelter to,' the old woman answered.

'Take it to her then,' the tsar said, 'and ask her to sew some shirts for me.'

The old woman brought the linen home. Vasilisa made the shirts and the old woman took them to the tsar. Then Vasilisa sat at the window and waited to see what would happen next.

Soon a servant from the palace came to the house and said, 'The tsar wishes to see for himself the clever needlewoman who has made his shirts. He would like to reward her personally.'

Vasilisa rose and went to the palace and was presented before the tsar. As soon as the two saw each other, they fell in love. The tsar took her by her hands and made her sit beside him. 'Beautiful Vasilisa,' he said, 'please be my wife.'

Vasilisa agreed, and the two soon married.

After some time, Vasilisa's father returned, and she invited him to live in the palace with them. She also took the old woman to live with them.

As for the little wooden doll, Vasilisa carried it in her pocket all her life.

Ivan Popyalof and the Twelve-headed Serpent

Long ago, deep in the heart of Russ, was a village that had been plunged into darkness by a serpent's curse. Only old folks remembered the golden days and regaled their grandchildren with stories of sunshine, blue skies, emerald rivers, singing birds, and fields full of crops. But now there was never-ending night. The people of this accursed village awoke to it, spent their days in its shadows, and went to sleep in its gloom.

In this village lived an old peasant Popyalof, his wife and their three young sons, Peter, Alexander and Ivan. While Peter and Alexander were like all normal boys, Ivan, the youngest, was slow of wit. He was a dull little child who had grown into an awkward adolescent.

All day long, he lay by the stove, rolling in the ashes, not uttering a word, only dozing or gazing blankly at the void.

One day, after twelve years, Ivan arose, shook the ash off himself and said to his father, 'I am going to kill the serpents, Father, so make me a mace five poods in weight.'

And how much did a pood weigh? Aha! About 16.38 kilograms.

His father, happy that his son had at last stirred, set about making the mace. He went to his workshop and hammered out a five-pood mace.

When the mace was ready, Ivan walked around till he found an open field. There he flung the mace straight up in the air. Then he went home.

Some hours later, he went back to the field and stood there with his head thrown back. An object came hurtling down; it was the mace. It hit Ivan on the forehead and broke in two.

Ivan went home and said to his father, 'Father, make me another mace, this time of ten poods in weight.'

His father made him a new mace. Ivan went out into the field and flung it high into the sky.

The mace disappeared in the air for three dark days and three long nights.

On the fourth day, Ivan went to the same spot. As the mace whistled down, Ivan put out his knee, and the mace split into three.

Ivan went home and asked his father to make him a third mace, this time of fifteen poods. With that in his hand, he went out to the open plain again and flung it into the air one more time.

This time, the mace disappeared for six long, black days and nights.

On the seventh day, Ivan went to the same spot as before. Down thudded the mace, struck Ivan's forehead, and did not break.

'At last, I have a mace that is good enough against the snakes!' Ivan exclaimed.

He hurried home and told his brothers, 'Let's go. Together we will kill the serpents, and only then return.

Preparations were made for the journey, and the three young lads, kissing their old parents goodbye, set forth.

The brothers rode for a long time, crossing fields and forests, streams and valleys.

One day, they stopped at a waterfall to rest. High above, at the mouth of the waterfall, they saw a jagged mountain cave and guessed that this *was* the serpents' den.

They pitched their tent in the dark forest closeby, and Ivan prepared for the fight. He took off his gloves, hung them on a branch and instructed his brothers. 'Keep an eye on my gloves. When they start dripping with blood, come quickly to my aid.' Then he went up as close to the cave as he could and crouched in the tall grass growing there.

Hours passed, a cold breeze stirred the grass, and the hair on Ivan's arms stood up. Presently he heard the clip-clop of a horse, and peeping out, saw a serpent with three heads riding up.

The serpent's horse suddenly stumbled. His hound started to howl. His falcon flapped its wings and screeched.

The serpent hissed angrily, and Ivan, who was within earshot, heard him say, 'Why have you halted, you good-for-nothing steed? Why do you howl, you mangy mutt? And you, noisy bird, have you lost your mind?'

'I halt,' answered the steed, 'the bird screeches and the dog howls, master, because we sense the presence of Ivan nearby. The peasant's son, the one they call a no-good, is here, and your end swiftly draws near.'

The serpent rattled by this, cried out, 'Show yourself, Ivanushka! Tell me, do you wish to fight me, or do you come in peace?'

Stepping out from behind the grass, Ivan quietly

replied, 'What do you think? Would I ever make peace with the likes of you?'

The two ran at each other and there was a clash of steel. In a few minutes, the serpent's heads were chopped off by Ivan's mace.

Then Ivan went to the tent and rested.

The next night, he returned and took his position by the cave once more. Soon enough, a six headed serpent came riding up. Ivan threw his mace at him, skillfully felling the serpent, and swiftly severed its heads. The following night, a nine-headed snake came and met with the same fate. Ivan gathered all the fallen heads and burned them. He waited, but the darkness still remained.

The next night, as Ivan stood in vigil, a twelve-headed serpent came up. On discovering his sons' dead bodies, he let out a terrifying hiss.

'Who dared to kill my sons?' he thundered. Was it you, hiding in the bushes? Come out and face me like a man and let us settle our scores.'

Ivan sprang out of the bushes, ready to face the challenge, and they started to fight. He easily chopped off four heads, but this serpent was mightier and Ivan found himself sinking into the swamp. When he had taken three more heads, he saw that he was up to his waist in the swamp. The serpents' fallen heads

still looked menacing, their eyes blazing red. But undaunted, he fought on and severed three more. By now, the swamp had swallowed him up to his breast. 'The glove must be bleeding,' he thought, 'but where are my brothers?'

The serpent attacked, his sword shooting sparks, but Ivan dodged him. He threw his mace at him slicing off one more head. This time, the mud tightened round his neck. 'I will be killed if my brothers don't hurry, buried in the earth right here and right now,' he despaired.

The serpent too was terribly weakened and paused for rest. Both waited as time stood still. There was no saying who would win. Suddenly the silence was rent by a raven's harsh cry. The bird circled them, unsure if they were alive. 'Krof! Krof!' it screeched.

The serpent hoarsely called to the raven. 'Come here, black bird. Fly to my wife in the cave and tell her to come quickly and finish off Ivan.'

The raven flew over Ivan, who said, 'Handsome bird, please go to my brothers in the forest. Wake them and tell them that if I am to survive, and our land is to see daylight, they need to hurry and help me complete our task. When this evil serpent is killed, we will give you its flesh as reward.'

The raven liked Ivan's words and flew straight to inform his brothers. He cried raucously till they awoke,

then he gave them Ivan's message. Peter and Alexander scrambled to their feet and saw the glove dripping with blood. They ran through the forest and arrived at the battle scene. Ivan commanded them to find his mace and throw it at the serpent. They did as told, and with the mace hacked off the serpent's last head. Then they pulled Ivan out of the swamp, gathered all twelve heads and threw them in a huge bonfire. The serpent's flesh they gave to the raven. When the heads had burned, they buried the ashes deep in the ground.

As soon as they did that, a bright light shone throughout the land!

Jubilant at having accomplished their mission, Ivan and his brothers started for home.

Suddenly Ivan realised he had left his gloves by the cave. Telling his brothers to wait, he went back to fetch them. He reached the entrance to the serpents' cave. There were his gloves lying on the ground. As he was about to pick them up, he heard the voices of the serpent's wife and daughters-in-law. He turned himself into a cat, and mewing sweetly tiptoed inside.

Sitting amidst them, he heard one say, 'How do we destroy that scoundrel, Ivan Popyalof?'

The youngest wife said, 'I will cause a famine as Ivan rides home. He and his brothers will crave a bite but there will be nothing to eat, except apples on a lone

tree, which will be me in disguise. Let Ivan pick a fruit! I will instantly rip him to pieces, that's what I'll do.'

'If that doesn't work,' said the middle wife, 'I will create a great thirst as Ivan rides home. The ground will be parched for miles like a desert, save for an oasis which will be me. Let Ivan try to take a sip! I will tear him to shreds in a minute,' she gloated.

'If that is to fail,' said the eldest wife, 'I will cause a deep fatigue in the air as Ivan rides. He will crave rest, and in the distance he will see a plump silk bed beckoning him which will be me. O just let him sit! I will bite him till by a bloody death he dies.'

'And I,' said their mother-in-law, wife of the twelve-headed snake. 'I will open my mouth so wide that it will stretch from the earth till the sky. Let Ivan come riding; I will swallow him alive.'

Having heard enough, Ivan crept out of the hut, changed into his human form, gathered his gloves and hurried to where his brothers were waiting.

It was a beautiful day, and for the first time the brothers experienced daylight. Everything looked new and fresh. As they rode on, admiring the miracle of sunshine, a great hunger gnawed at them. But there was nothing to eat. Then, in the distance, they saw a tree covered with red ripe apples.

The elder brother said, 'Let's eat an apple each.'

But before they could go any further, Ivan stopped them, saying, 'Wait a minute, brothers, I'll try them first.' He took his mace and threw it at the tree. There was a groan, the tree vanished and in its place lay the bloody body of the serpent's wife.

The brothers thanked Ivan and rode on. Suddenly after a while, a deep thirst made them gasp with longing for water. They looked but everything around was parched and dry. They rode on and saw, to their delight, a calm blue oasis. O what a beautiful sight! The older brothers eagerly said, 'Let's go and from the oasis drink.'

ut Ivan Popyalof shouted, 'Stop, brothers!' He threw his mace at the oasis. There was a shriek of pain and the water in the oasis became bloody.

As they rode further, their hunger and thirst mysteriously gone, they felt a great drowsiness overwhelm them. In the distance, they saw a green meadow upon which was spread a bed of silk cushions. Wearily the older brothers said, 'Let's rest for a while here,' and started for the bed. Before they could go any further, Ivan cried out, 'Wait, brothers!' He threw his mace and struck the cushions with it. A cry pierced the sky and the cushions became a bloody serpent body.

Ivan and his brothers had barely gone a mile when suddenly before them, flew a serpent, its jaws

stretching from the sky above to the earth below. It was the twelve-headed serpent's wife and there was nowhere to go. They thought of jumping over it on a run. Then Ivan said, 'Let's throw three poods of salt into her mouth.' So they did and she gulped it down thinking it to be Ivan. It was only after she had tasted it that she discovered she'd been tricked, and she started off after Ivan again.

As they reached the village outskirts, a blacksmith's forge stood to their right. Ivan and his brothers ducked inside it and shut the forge's twelve doors tight.

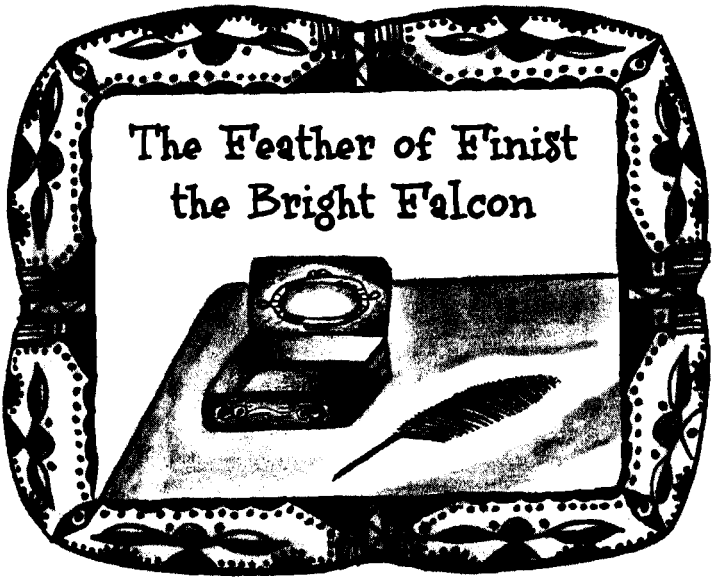
Soon enough, the serpent's wife flew to the forge and said, 'Ivan Popyalof, come out and face me!'

And Ivan replied, 'Stick your tongue through the twelve doors and take me.'

Ivan and his brothers, in the meantime, heated iron pincers. When the serpent's wife stuck in her tongue through the doors, they pulled her tightly by it and thumped her with hammers. When she was quite dead, they set her on fire and scattered her ashes in the air.

Finally, Ivan and his brothers returned home and there they lived, feasting and revelling, drinking mead and wine.

I was there. I drank wine, I drank mead, but however much I drank, only my moustache got wet!



Zhili-Byili ...

Once there was a merchant who lived with his three daughters in a certain village in Russia. The two older girls loved ribbons and bows and all things fancy and fashionable. They preened and pouted before a mirror and hoped one day to catch handsome rich suitors. The youngest daughter, on the other hand, was a simple girl who liked keeping house and looking after her father.

One day the merchant had to go into town for some business. He called his daughters and asked them if he could get them something special from the markets there.

'O please get me a silk scarf!' exclaimed the eldest daughter.

'I would love a pair of silver sandals!' gushed the middle one.

'And what should I get for you, my darling?' the merchant asked the youngest.

'Bring for me, dear father,' she said quietly, 'the feather of Finist the Bright Falcon.'

The merchant was puzzled by her enigmatic request, but promised each girl to do his best and set off.

After finishing his work, the merchant went to the bazaar and found a lovely silk scarf for his eldest, fine silver sandals for his second daughter, and though he searched high and low for the feather requested by his youngest, he could not find it in any of the town's markets.

He returned home and gave the elder sisters their gifts. To the youngest he said ruefully, 'I looked everywhere for your feather, my dear, but alas, it eluded me.'

If she was disappointed, she hid it well. 'That's all right, Papa,' she said. 'Maybe the next time I'll be luckier.'

Her sisters strutted about in their new loot, looked at each other and tittered. 'What a stupid thing to want! A feather of all things!' their look seemed to say. The youngest, aware of their gaze, ignored them and remained silent.

A year later, the merchant had to go into town again on work.

As usual, he called his daughters and said, 'What would you like me to get for you from the town, dear daughters?'

'I want to make a new dress for myself. Please bring a sheath of blue satin for me,' said the eldest quickly.

'For me, a gold belt will do,' said the middle one.

And the youngest, after consideration, replied, 'Get for me, batyushka-mine, the feather of Finist the Bright Falcon.'

The merchant reached the town, and after finishing his work, went to the bazaar. He bought the gifts for the elder two, but the mysterious feather, once again, was nowhere to be found.

When he returned home, his elder daughters were ecstatic with their presents. They sat down and began to sew a new dress.

Turning to his youngest, who looked expectantly at him, he sighed heavily and said, 'Your feather, my dear, is indeed very unique. I looked everywhere for it—in streets where rare birds are sold, in milliners' shops where feathered hats are sewn. I even went to secret alleys where magic is conducted. There I heard that the feather of Finist the Bright Falcon or Phoenix as he is also known, who once was a tsarevich, is only

a myth. Give up wishing for it, my love, for you'll only be disappointed. Ask me for something different next time!'

If the daughter was astonished by her father's explanation, we will never know. But one thing's for certain—she was a very determined young girl who had set her heart on something, and his advice deterred her not one bit.

'Batyushka, I only want the feather, and who knows, luck might smile on me next time.' She sweetly smiled and left the room.

Months passed, and one day the merchant announced that he was going into town again. As always, he asked for his daughters' wishlist.

'We want silver filigreed earrings,' the elder two chimed together.

'And what does your little heart desire?' he said to the youngest, tweaking her cheek.

'The feather of Finist the Bright Falcon, dear Papa,' she repeated for the third time.

What could the father do? He had no choice. He went to the town, to the streets of the bazaar, and silver filigreed earrings were there in plenty. He bought a few for his elder daughters. But where was he to look for the magical feather of Finist the Bright Falcon? he wondered sadly.

The next morning the merchant started for home. As he was walking on the narrow, deserted path through the forest, a strange old man appeared out of nowhere before him. He looked a hundred years old, and was wizened and bent. In his hands gleamed a little ancient casket.

'Excuse me, sir,' said the merchant politely. 'May I ask who you are and what is in that exquisite casket you carry?'

The old man looked at the merchant from head to toe, and said, 'I am from a distant kingdom. In the casket I carry something very special—the feather of Finist the Bright Falcon.'

The merchant was stunned. Never in his mind had he really believed in the existence of the feather. His heart thudded and he hesitantly said, 'Please let me have the feather, old man. For you see, I have a daughter who cares for nothing but the feather. It is all she desires. If I go home without it again, she will be heartbroken. Give me the feather, and I will pay whatever you ask for it.'

The old man's eyes bored into the merchant's. 'You have a young daughter who *knows* about it and wants it? Hmm, I see. Well, the feather is not for sale. But since she has knowledge of it and desires it, she probably deserves it. Take it for a thousand roubles only.'

The father quickly paid up, gripped the casket and hurried home.

His daughters came to the door to meet him.

He gave the elder ones their trinkets, and then calling the youngest to his side, said, 'My darling daughter, see what I got you! Here you go!'

The youngest daughter saw the casket and knew. She danced with joy, hugged her darling papa, and taking the box, kissed it and caressed it, and held it tightly to her heart.

After dinner, when all had retired to their bedrooms to sleep, the girl locked hers from inside and opened the casket. She held her breath as the feather of Finist the Bright Falcon drifted out. It flew up to the ceiling swirling and floating, its iridescence illuminating the dim room. Then slowly it began its descent, and softly kissing her skin, landed on the floor.

As soon as the feather hit the floor, there was a crackle, sparks flew, and before the girl's very eyes appeared a tsarevich divinely handsome, just like the hero of a fairy tale! The two young souls looked at each other and were enchanted. Shy at first, they gradually became friends as the night progressed. They talked all through the night—of their dreams and fears and secrets and many other things sweet and nice, amusing and daring. So lost were they in each other that they

forgot all about time and space. It seemed to them that they alone existed in the whole world. But their laughter and gay chatter awoke the sisters in the next room. Annoyed and curious, the sisters got out of bed and went to investigate. They knocked loudly on the maiden's door.

Suddenly all was quiet.

'Who are you talking to, sister?' they demanded to know.

'Nobody,' she replied. 'Sleeptalking, perhaps.' She smothered a giggle.

'Open the door, we want to come in.'

'In a moment,' she said, looking anxiously at the tsarevich.

The tsarevich smiled tenderly, tapped his elegant boot on the floor and became a feather once more. The maiden gently laid it in the casket and unlocked her door.

The sisters barged in. They looked here and there, under the bed, behind the curtains, through the windows, but found no one.

With sour faces they left, and the young girl locked her door. Once she felt safe again, she took out the casket from under the bed. Opening it, she delicately lifted the feather, took it to her open window, and bringing it to her lips whispered, 'Fly away, my darling

Finist, soar into the open sky, and we will meet again tomorrow night.'

The feather fluttered out and stalled in mid-air, then it transformed into a powerful falcon-phoenix. It unfurled its wings and flew high into the sky, going up and up till it was a mere speck on the horizon.

The girl then went to bed.

The next night when everyone was in their rooms, the young girl opened her window wide and stood gazing at the starry sky. Suddenly, with a whoosh, the falcon was there. It turned into a feather, sailed in through the window, struck the floor and changed into Finist the tsarevich once more. They embraced each other and talked of many things. The girl confessed that, almost a year ago, she had seen in a dream, a magical prince, who was once a man, and then a glorious bird, enclosed in a feather—the Finist feather. And now the dream had come to pass.

The sisters, alert and suspicious, tiptoed to her door and heard their voices. This time they ran to their father.

'Batyushka, a visitor comes to meet our sister late every night. He is, in fact, sitting in her room right now, talking and laughing. Come with us and see for yourself.'

The father got up from the desk where he had

been settling his accounts and walked to his youngest daughter's room. He knocked and she opened in a moment. He went in and asked her how she slept. They stood talking for a while. The room was empty save for them; there were no signs of a visiting man. For the tsarevich had long since become a feather and returned to the box.

Bidding her goodnight, he turned to his elder daughters. 'Ah, you meddlesome girls,' he chided them. 'You are much too suspicious. I advise you to mind your own business and leave your sister alone.'

The sisters felt humiliated and embarrassed, and to prove themselves right to their father, and to spite their sister, they hatched a diabolical plot.

When evening came and all was dark outside, they took a ladder and placed it against their sister's window. While one climbed up, the other handed her ten long knives sharpened to extreme points. First they fastened the window with wires and ropes, then with deft craftsmanship arranged the knives to stand upright on the window's ledge.

At dinner, they slipped a sleeping potion into their sister's water. Later, when the girl retired to her room, she felt very drowsy, and put her head on the pillow to rest awhile before her beloved arrived.

Late at night, Finist the Bright Falcon circled the

sky and swooped right down on the window's ledge. He tried to push open the window, but the sharp pointed knives pierced his breast, going through his heart like a hot knife through butter. He gave a pained cry, his vision dimmed. Beating against the window to awaken his love, his brilliant feathers were plucked straight out. There was blood everywhere, and feathers big and small fluttered around. He struggled desperately, but the window remained firmly shut. When he felt his life ebbing away, his energy all gone, the handsome bird, hanging on to the upper ledge asked, 'Have you ceased to love me already, my dear?

Upon getting no response, he continued, 'Goodbye, dear maiden. If you still love me and want to look for me, then you must seek me in the thrice-nine kingdom in the thrice-ten land. But, before you find me, you will have to wear out three pairs of iron shoes, break three cast-iron staffs and eat three loaves of stone-hard bread. Goodbye!'

The maiden was asleep. She heard these bitter words as though in a dream. She struggled to wake up, twisted and turned, groaned softly, but it was all in vain.

When the early rays of morning light streamed in through her window, she awoke with a start. Her head throbbed and her heart felt heavy. She swung

out of bed and ran to the window. What she saw made her gasp in utter shock. Wires barred the window, sharp knives were entrenched into the ledge, and there were feathers everywhere. She sobbed wildly when she saw the dark drying pool of crimson blood. She knew in an instant what had happened. Her jealous sisters had wrought this mischief. Her heart was breaking; she felt dizzy and helpless. 'O dear lord! What am I to do? My sisters have destroyed my love.' Then as if in a trance, the words of the falcon came dimly back to her. She dried her tears, ordered her heart and mind to be firm, and walked out of her house that very instant.

Her first stop was to a smithy where she bade the smith make her three pairs of iron shoes and three cast-iron staffs. Then she went to a baker and bought three loaves of stone-hard bread. Fastening to her feet the heavy iron shoes, holding the staff and gnawing on a loaf of unpalatable bread, she set off resolutely for the thrice-nine kingdom in the thrice-ten land, to look for her love—Finist the Bright Falcon.

She walked and walked. The iron shoes started to give way, the cast-iron staff broke in two, and the dry bread finished, when she saw before her an izbushka standing on chicken legs. Wasn't this the hut where Baba Yaga, the grandmother of all witches, lived?

The maiden shrugged her shoulders, walked up to it and knocked.

'Mistress of all mistresses!' she cried. 'It's dark outside! Shelter me please, a maiden all alone.'

The door opened and an old bony woman hustled out. 'Come inside, sweet traveller! Where to, dear?'

'Oh babushka! I'm on a quest to find Finist the Bright Falcon.'

'Well, pretty maiden, you have to seek him far and wide!'

When morning dawned, the babushka said to the girl, 'Here, take these gifts from me—a silver spinning board and a golden spindle. Hold the spindle in your hands and it will spin by itself a thread of pure gold. Go now to my middle sister and she will direct you further.'

Then Baba Yaga placed on the ground before the maiden, a ball. She gave it a push and said, 'Wherever goes the ball, that's the path you have to take. Do not veer from it or you'll be lost forever in darkness and forests deep. The ball will guide you to my sister's.'

The maiden thanked the old woman and trudged behind the ball. She had tied to her feet the second pair of iron shoes, held the second staff, and cut her teeth into the second loaf of stone-hard bread.

She walked and she walked. Whether for a long time or a short time, it's hard to say. Her second pair of

iron shoes wore out, her second cast-iron staff broke, and she finished the second loaf of stone-hard bread.

Finally, the ball rolled to a stop at the second sister's hut.

She knocked and cried, 'Good hostess! Let me in. It's dark outside and I am so alone.'

'Welcome, lovely maiden,' the babushka replied, opening the door and ushering in the girl. 'Warm yourself by the fire and tell me where you are off to.'

'Ah, babushka, I seek Finist the Bright Falcon.'

'Across the plains, over high mountains and beyond the sea you will have to look, my dear!'

When morning broke, the old woman said, 'Here, take this gift from me—a silver plate and a golden egg. When the time comes, you will know when it does, put the egg on the plate, and it will spin and multiply.' She then rolled the ball again and said, 'Follow the ball. It will take you to our eldest sister's. She will know where to find Finist the Bright Falcon!'

The maiden took leave of the old woman, tied to her feet the third pair of iron shoes, held the third staff, and cut her teeth into the third loaf of stone-hard bread and went on her way. She walked and walked. The third shoe broke, the third staff fell apart, and she consumed the third loaf of the dry, hard bread. The ball stopped at the third, strange little hut that she knew so well by now.

She stood at the door and called out to the eldest sister, 'Kind hostess, it is pitch dark tonight. Let me in, and I'll be much obliged.'

The door creaked open and an ancient hag came out. 'Come in, dear lovely. Welcome to my house. Why are you on the road on this dark night? What do you seek and what path do you take?'

'O babushka, I've been on the road for so long now. I've travelled through endless plains, crossed shimmering deserts, climbed hills small and big, in my search for Finist the Bright Falcon.'

'Aah, it is difficult to find him, very difficult! But your journey's almost done now. Falter not and go on straight to so-and-so town. There resides Finist. He is engaged to the wafer-maker's daughter. They will soon be married, so don't delay, and quickly make your way.'

The morning was long in coming, and the maiden didn't sleep a wink. In the grey dawn she got up and bid her gracious host goodbye.

'Here, take this gift. It's an embroidery frame with a golden needle. Simply hold the frame and place the needle on it, and the needle will embroider by itself. Well go now, may God be with you, and do not forget to ask the wafer-maker to hire you as her serving maid.'

Skazana, zdelana.

As was said, so was done.

The maiden went to the wafer-maker's yard and asked to work as a servant. The wafer-maker hired her. The maiden had to warm the oven, carry water, prepare dinner, and do so many chores that her hands were soon covered with blisters. The wafer-maker was pleased.

'It's wonderful!' she said to her daughter, 'that we found this maid. She is so helpful and hardworking and good—she does everything and without any money!'

Her chores all done for the day, the maiden sat in the yard outside and took out the silver spinning board and the golden spindle. She placed the spindle on the board, and out of nowhere and with a zing it stretched out a thread of pure gold!

The wafer-maker's daughter saw this amazing instrument and addressed the maid, 'Sweet maid, won't you sell me your magic toy?'

'Certainly. You can have it, but you will have to pay a price.'

'Name your price, girl.'

'Let me watch over your fiancé sleeping alone in his chambers tonight.'

The wafer-maker's daughter was enchanted by the magic toy and wanted it at any cost. 'I know what to do!' she thought to herself. 'I will give my fiancé a sleeping

potion with his wine, then the foolish maidservant can sit as long as she wants and swat the flies as he sleeps! And the spindle will help my mother and I amass a fortune in gold.' She agreed to the maiden's price.

During the day, Finist the Bright Falcon was not to be seen. All day long, he roamed the blue infinite skies, returning only at night.

When he came, everyone got ready for dinner. The maidservant served him food. The wafer-maker and her daughter kept a close watch. And he, good youth, didn't know who the maiden was. The daughter slipped a sleeping potion into his wine and soon his eyes grew heavy. She tucked him in bed and called the maiden. 'Go now to my fiancé's room and drive away the flies from his face.'

The maiden entered the room, her heart pounding, her speech prepared. At last she would reclaim her love. Finist lay fast asleep on the bed. She called out to him but he did not awake, so heavily drugged he was. She tried and tried, drove away the flies, and wiped the hot tears she copiously shed.

'Wake up, Finist the Bright Falcon! Wake up, my love! It is I, your maiden, come from so far and wide. I looked for you, following all your instructions. Three pairs of iron shoes I wore out, three cast-iron staffs I broke, and three dry stone-hard loaves I chugged

down my throat. Now that I have found you, please wake up and acknowledge me.'

But Finist the Falcon slept on. He felt nothing, didn't even stir, and thus the night passed.

When morning came, the maiden left the room and resumed her duties.

When all her tasks were done, the maiden sat down once more in a quiet corner of the yard, with the silver plate in her lap. She brought out the golden egg and put it on the plate. And whoosh! It rolled and multiplied magically. This caught the attention of the others. The wafer-maker's daughter also saw this and exclaimed, 'Sweet maid, I must have your wonderful toy! Please give it to me.'

'You can have it, but you will have to buy it first!'

'And what is the price?'

'Another night watching over your fiancé alone.'

'I agree to your condition!'

As before, Finist the Falcon was away circling the skies.

At dinner again, he was served by the maiden. There was not even a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. Again, the wafer-maker's daughter slipped a sleeping potion into his wine. He felt groggy and went to bed. When he was fast asleep, the daughter called the maiden. 'Go in now and drive away the flies.'

And this time too, the maiden tried to wake him

up. She cried and cried, but Finist slept till morning, oblivious to everything.

On the third day, after work, the maiden sat with the embroidery frame in her hand. She laid the golden needle on the frame. And zip! the needle began to embroider. What exquisite patterns it sewed. They were a delight to behold! The wafer-maker's daughter saw this and said, 'Sell it to me, maid, sell me your delightful toy!'

'You can have it, but you will have to buy it first!'

'And what is its price?'

'A third night watching over your fiancé, and the toy is yours.'

'All right, I accept!'

In from the dark night flew in Finist the Falcon. At dinner, the daughter gave him a dose of sleeping potion and put him to bed. Then she packed off the maiden to shoo away the flies.

The maiden swatted the flies, and tearfully said, 'Wake up, Finist the Bright Falcon, wake up! It is I, your beloved. I have worn out three pairs of iron shoes, broken three cast-iron staffs, and eaten three stone-hard loaves. I have finally found you! Please don't let me down; open your eyes and recognise me.'

But Finist the Falcon heard nothing, and slept on blissfully.

For long she cried, and for long she tried to awaken

him. Suddenly, a tear from the maiden's eyes fell upon his cheek, and Finist the Falcon woke up with a start.

'Aah,' he said, rubbing his cheek, 'I feel scorched!'

He saw the maiden before him and looked mystified.

'It is I, Finist,' she said. 'You forget who I am. You once loved me and asked me to look for you. I have come to you now, worn out three pairs of iron shoes, broken three cast-iron staffs, and eaten three stony loaves! I searched for you far and wide and found you! Tonight is the third night that I stand on watch over you. You have been sleeping all along.'

As she spoke, something stirred in Finist's memory, and suddenly it all came back in a flash. He knew then who she was—the love of his life—for whom he had almost died. He was so happy to see her, so glad she had found him. They embraced and, like old times, talked well into the night. Their happiness was so rapturous that words fail to describe it.

When the last hour of the night had passed, they left the wafer-maker's house silently.

Next morning, the wafer-maker's daughter found her fiancé missing. Neither he, nor the maidservant was anywhere to be seen! She went to her mother to complain. Then she ordered a horse to be saddled and dashed off in chase.

She rode and she rode, searching high and low. She even went to the three old women, but they were clueless and unhelpful. At last she accepted that Finist was gone, vanished without a trace, and was forever lost to her. She had her toys at least, she reasoned; she'd find another fiancé in time.

Finist and the maiden reached her village and stood outside her father's house. Finist hit the damp earth and became a feather. The maiden picked it up and hid it in her blouse and went to her father.

The father turned pale when he saw her. He rushed to where she was standing and embraced her, relieved to have her back. 'Ah, my beloved daughter! I thought you had left us and gone from the white world forever. Now that you are back, tell me, where have you been all this time?'

'I had a mission to fulfil,' she simply replied.

Now it so happened that the day she reached was in the holy week, and her father was preparing to go to the church with his elder daughters.

'Come with us,' he said to his youngest. 'Today is such a joyous day for us.'

'But, batyushka dear, I have nothing suitable to wear.'

Just then her sisters came out, all dressed in their finest clothes. The maiden looked at them with no hard

feelings; her happiness was now secure and she would never let anyone jeopardise it ever again.

'Wear something from our wardrobe,' they offered.

'O sisters, your dresses don't fit me! It's better if I stay at home.'

So they went to the church without her, and when she was alone, the maiden took out her feather. It struck the ground and turned into her handsome Finist.

Tsarevich Finist whistled in the air, and there appeared dresses and hats, and a carriage of gold! They got dressed, got into the carriage and rode off.

They entered the church and went right up to the front. All the people there marvelled and wondered who the striking tsarevich and tsarevna were.

When the service was over, Finist and the maiden left before everyone else and went home. By the time the father and the elder sisters returned, the carriage, the dresses and the hats were all gone. The tsarevich had become a feather once more and lay in his casket.

'O sister!' the elder girls exclaimed. 'You should have come to the church with us. You should have seen the handsome tsarevich who came accompanied by a beautiful tsarevna.'

'It's all right, sisters! It's enough that you told me. I

feel as though I was there myself,' the maiden replied, suppressing a small smile.

Again the next day, the same thing happened.

On the third day, as the tsarevich and the maiden left the church, the father followed them and saw that the carriage came up to his house and then disappeared. He hurried back to the church.

On returning home with the elder daughters, he asked his youngest for an explanation.

This is what she said, 'Don't say anything, Father. Let me confess.'

She brought out the feather, let it float to the ground, and as it touched the earth, Tsarevich Finist emerged from the dust.

The father was dumbstruck initially, but as the two told their story, his happiness knew no bounds. He raged at his elder daughters and set them straight. Then he organised a wedding for his youngest and her loving mate, Finist.

What a grand wedding it was, what a celebration! The maiden looked beautiful and the tsarevich cut a fine figure.

I was there. I drank sweet wine, but it dripped down my whiskers and didn't go into my mouth.

Now, children, scram, begone, quickly, from the yard.

Once it so happened that a young girl, a priest's daughter, went for a walk in the forest near her village, without taking permission from her father or mother, and never returned. Three years went by and there was no sign of her. Her parents did not know where she had gone. They looked for her in the nearby villages, and then they gave up hope of ever seeing her again.

In the same village lived a daring hunter who did not let a day go by without going on a hunt with his dog.

One day, when he was in the forest, he found himself in a new and very deep part he had not explored before. As he walked, keeping his eyes open for a pheasant or a fowl, his dog bristled and began to bark.

The hunter looked straight ahead, and there on the woodland path before him, he saw a man sitting on a log, plaiting a bast shoe. As he pulled strips of bast, he looked up at the moon, shook his finger at it and said, 'Shine, bright moon, shine!'

The hunter was filled with amazement at this sight. The man's actions and words were very strange, but stranger still was his appearance. 'How is it,' thought the hunter, 'that a man can look like that? He is still in the prime of his life—young and fit, then why is his hair snow-white?'

This thought had barely struck him when the man said, 'You are amazed I know, but you needn't be, for I am, you see, the devil's grandfather!'

It was then that the hunter knew that before him sat no ordinary man, but a léshy, a wood-spirit. He levelled his gun and fired a bullet. The léshy was shot in the stomach. He gave a soft groan and lurched forward, but regained his balance, got up and dragged himself into the thicket.

The hunter's dog ran after him and the hunter followed the dog.

The hunter walked on and on. Finally he stopped at the base of a hill. His dog was sniffing at a tiny crevice in the hill. They entered it and saw a hut hidden within. The hunter stepped into the hut, and there, stretched out on a bench, was the léshy. He was dead. Beside him, weeping bitterly, sat a young girl, who kept exclaiming through her tears, 'What am I going to do? Who will take care of me now?'

'Greetings, good maiden,' said the hunter. 'Where are you from? What brought you here? How do you know the creature you mourn?'

'Ah, I do not know the answers. I do not know whether I even have a father and mother. It's as though I've always been here, in this forest.'

'Well then, come with me. I will take you back to my village, and we can figure things out.'

The hunter took the girl by the hand and led her out of the forest, marking each tree with his knife as they passed.

Now this was the same young girl who, three years ago, had gone for a walk in the forest and disappeared. She had been carried off by the léshy, and had lived in his hut all this time. Her clothes were in tatters, she was practically naked, but strangely unaware and unembarrassed by her state. She seemed to be in a trance, disconnected from the reality of life outside the forest.

When they reached the village, the hunter began asking people if they knew anyone who had lost a daughter or a niece some years ago. Word got around quickly, and the priest rushed out to see the forest girl. The moment he saw her, he knew that she was the daughter he had lost three years ago.

'Why, that's my daughter!' he cried. His wife ran up too and said, 'O my dear child! Where have you been all this while? I had lost all hope of ever seeing you again.'

The girl looked around wildly, uncomprehendingly. Her parents brought her home and looked after her. Slowly, with time, the girl began to recall her past, and got used to her new life. She fell in love with the hunter and married him.

For many months, the couple wandered through the forest looking for the hut the girl had lived in with the léshy, but they never found it.

There was once a Russian tsar who thought up a novel way to find wives for his three young sons. He called them and said, 'My handsome boys, take your bows and arrows and shoot from this spot. Wherever your arrow lands, from that very place you will find yourself a wife.'

The sons were bemused, but they were used to their father's eccentric ways.

All three brothers took aim in order of seniority. The oldest brother released his arrow, and it landed

in the courtyard of a boyar's mansion. The second brother strung his bow, and his arrow fell in the garden of a merchant's residence. The third brother notched his bow and let fly his arrow, and it just vanished into thin air!

The older two brothers rushed to their betrotheds with rings in hand—the eldest to a young boyar beauty, the middle to the rich and pretty merchant's daughter. The youngest, who was called Tsarevich Ivan, went in search of his arrow.

Ivan looked everywhere—at the baker's, the weaver's, even the shoemaker's, but his arrow was nowhere to be found.

As he was returning home, he heard a frantic croaking in the ditch alongside. He peeped in, and there, in the ditch, was a huge green frog, its eyes round and shining, going, 'Kwa, Kwa.' By its side was lying Ivan's lost arrow! He bent to pick it up when suddenly the frog said, 'Where's my ring, fiancé?'

Ivan was taken aback by the frog's comment. He thought the frog was joking. At the same time he remembered his father's words and felt a wave of fear, repulsion and anxiety course through his body. He thought to himself, 'Is this to be my wife?'

But he calmed himself and said, 'Listen, frog, I cannot be your fiancé. You are a frog and I am a prince,

so let's not make small talk. Give me my arrow, and let's get on with our own lives.'

The frog looked crushed, and blinking its eyes, spoke once more, 'I heard your father's declaration, about his novel way to find you a bride. Shouldn't you obey him like your brothers and marry me? For after all, your arrow did fall in my domain. Honestly speaking, I think you are just shirking your duties and defying your dear father's wishes.'

Now we all know that Ivan was a simple fellow who trusted people and had faith in their judgement. He understood the frog's sentiments, and since it was impossible for him to think of a plan to get out of this sticky situation, he said, 'You're right, I'll have to marry you. I cannot go against my destiny, can I?'

Thus all the brothers were engaged. The tsar was happy until another worry started nagging him. 'I must choose an heir. But which of my three sons is most worthy?' he pondered. So in another idiosyncratic brainwave, he declared, 'I will choose as my successor the son whose fiancée is the cleverest. In the first test, I want all your fiancées to bake a priyanki for me. Go and inform them that I want the cakes ready by tomorrow.'

All the brothers went home a little worried, but the most anxious was Tsarevich Ivan. How could his fiancée,

a large frog, ever hope to accomplish this human task, unless of course she was a witch?

He went to his fiancee's ditch and called her out. He told her how he had lost the race to be the tsar's heir since there was no way he could expect her, a frog, to bake a cake for the royal palate.

'Hmm,' croaked the frog, 'you never know. Why don't you come by tomorrow? I find one thinks more clearly in the morning light than at night.'

So Ivan did as he was told and returned to his chambers to sleep.

Next morning, on the ledge of the ditch was a parcel labelled for him. He tore it open, and inside was the most perfect priyanki ever! On it, intricately carved, were forts and castles, horses and birds, spires and trees, girls and boys. And in the centre was the pièce-de-résistance—a snow-white lake of fluffy dough. A marvellous flour sculpture, he couldn't wait to show it to his father.

The tsar was mystified. The frog fiancée had done a splendid job, much much better than the other fiancées.

'I never thought that one day my kingdom was fated to have a frog-queen,' mused he. But there was another test for them. 'Sons, for the second test, tell your fiancées to weave me a rug by tomorrow.'

'What am I to do?' thought Tsarevich Ivan. 'The cake was a fluke. I don't know how she did it, but is it possible for my fiancée to weave a Cashmere carpet? I'll go and inform her nonetheless.'

He went to the ditch, and found his wife-to-be sitting in the sun, waiting for him.

'Your cake was brilliant, a stroke of pure genius. But now, dear friend, the tsar has asked you to make a rug. Well, I suppose we should let someone else win this time,' prattled Ivan.

'Hmm,' responded the frog. 'Why don't you rest, Ivan? You look exhausted. Let me think of a solution. Come and meet me in the morning, which I believe is much wiser than the evening.'

Next morning Tsarevich Ivan went to meet Tsarevna Frog, and found on the ledge of the ditch a rolled up package addressed to him. He took it to the court, and you could hear a collective gasp as the rug was unfurled. It had the most exquisite pattern woven in threads of silver and gold, telling the story of a queen waiting for her beloved by a lake with the reflection of the moon for company!

'She had done it again! What was she?' Ivan wondered, a feeling of admiration and love blossoming for her in his heart!

Again he was declared the winner.

'And now for the final test,' announced the tsar. 'Tomorrow I want to meet your fiancées personally and get to know them better.'

'So I've won twice already; maybe I can win again somehow,' said a hopeful voice in Ivan's head. But then the voice of doom took over. 'How can you, you fool? Have you forgotten what your fiancée is?'

Anyhow, Ivan wanted to see the frog. He had grown quite fond of her and enjoyed her company. She was nodding drowsily when he reached, but sat up alert and chatted gaily about this and that.

'Hmm, so your father wants to meet his future daughter-in-laws. Don't worry, Tsarevich, I'll pull it off. You go for the party first and I will follow later.'

Tsarevich Ivan heeded her advice and arrived at the party alone. His brothers were there with their betrotheds, decked out in feathers and jewels. They seemed a little sore at him for winning the first two rounds, but today their confidence knew no bounds.

'Hello brother, where's your lovely fiancée? Having a quiet dinner somewhere in a ditch?' They snickered and gave each other malicious winks.

An hour later, a regal carriage drew up at the party's entrance. Everyone turned to stare as a beautiful woman stepped out, her milk-and-blood complexion glowing. She smiled at everyone, looked

around, and when she saw Ivan, laughed delightedly and walked up to him. Everyone was awestruck. Ivan too had a perplexed look on his face, but when she told him she was his frog-fiancée, his happiness knew no bounds.

'Who is she? How does she know Ivan? Has anyone else seen her before in this town?' A million questions hung in the air.

When the tsar and the tsaritsa arrived, the elder sons introduced their fiancées and Ivan too came with the lovely lady on his arm. He said, 'Dear Father, meet the talented and clever Elena. She's the one my arrow found. She was a frog but now she's not.'

The tsar looked puzzled but also relieved that perhaps the future tsaritsa would be a regular human, after all.

Elena and Ivan went to the table, and they drank some wine. Elena sprinkled a few drops on her right sleeve. She ate a morsel of the baked swan, and tucked a bone or two inside her left sleeve. All the while, the other fiancées observed her jealously and copied her every move.

Then the music started and Ivan and Elena got up to dance. Everyone was mesmerised by Elena—even the rat under the table stopped gnawing and stared. As they swirled together, Elena gently waved her right

sleeve and there appeared a crystal lake. Everyone laughed joyously as a cool breeze drifting from the lake gave them much relief. Next she waved her left arm, and a pair of swans glided on the lake gracefully. All were awestruck by this miracle, but no one was prouder than our hero, Ivan.

Then it was the turn of the elder brothers' girls to dance. They wrung their right wrists and sprayed the guests with stale wine. They flicked their left wrists and half-eaten bones flew out and smacked the tsar right in the face. The tsar was furious. He had his security called, and the girls were unceremoniously thrown out.

While everyone was engrossed in this hullabaloo, Ivan slipped out, ran to the ditch, hunted for the frogskin, found it, made a bonfire, and threw it in. He was so completely smitten by Elena that he did not want her to spend another day in the ditch as a frog.

When the party was over, Elena started for her ditch, but Ivan proudly invited her to his rooms and told her what he had done. Oh dear! All hell broke loose.

'Why, Ivan, why did you have to be so impatient? Why did you think *you* could destroy my skin? I, Elena, tsarevna of a faraway land, was cursed by my wizard father to spend three years as a frog. My time was almost over, but now you've ruined everything.

I cannot stay here anymore; I have to wander till you win me again. So farewell, dear love, come and find me somehow, somewhere. I know you can.' And she turned into a white swan and sailed out of the window.

To cut a long story short, Ivan, after he had wept his heart out, set off like a brave lad, his heart leading the way. On and on he walked. He may have been on the right path or the wrong one, for dear readers, he didn't know where to find her. One day he entered a forest, and in the distance saw a dilapidated hut. The hut was rotating slowly on chicken legs. It sensed Ivan approach and came to a stop and turned around to face him. Ivan walked up the stairs and went inside. There was Baba Yaga, the grandmother of all witches, sprawled by the hearth. Her nose was so long that it touched her chin, her grey hair was dishevelled, and she was bony and scrawny, but in her eyes an intense light sparkled.

She looked at Ivan and said, 'What brings you here, Tsarevich Ivan?'

Ivan, mortally afraid of her, stuck out his chin and said, 'Very hospitable you are, babushka dear. Is this how you interrogate all your guests? Without asking them in, feeding or offering a drink?'

Baba Yaga liked his confidence. She invited him in, gave him food and water, and slowly warming up, Ivan narrated his saga.

'I'll help you free her from her father's curse, son. Elena comes here often in the form of a swan. When she comes here tomorrow, catch hold of her and don't let go. She will keep changing, but do not let go at any cost. Finally, when she becomes an arrow, break the arrow into three pieces and it'll become your princess. If you don't, you will lose her again.'

Before the swan flew in the next day, Baba Yaga hid Ivan behind her baking oven. Ivan tiptoed up to the swan, grabbed it with his bare hands, and before he knew it, he was holding a frog. He smiled at the frog—the form he had grown to love, but before he could utter a word, he held in his hands a scaly lizard. He almost let go, so repellent it looked, but the next moment it changed again, into a long slimy snake that hissed and squirmed. Ivan took a deep breath, his breath almost stopped, and then, to his great relief, the snake disappeared and became an arrow instead. He held the arrow firmly and broke it into three pieces, and as soon as he did that, Elena stood before him, in all her beauty.

They fell into each other's arms, weeping tears of joy and relief. 'You did it, Ivan, you came and saved me. Now I am no longer bound by the curse, for a man loves me for all I am worth.'

Baba Yaga loaned them one of her wondrous mares,

the kind that flies across the world in a day. They sat on it and reached Ivan's palace. The tsar was overjoyed to meet the pair and, as promised, made them the new tsar and tsaritsa. They lived together happily till they were quite, quite old.

In a certain village there lived two brothers, both muzhiks, one rich, the other poor. The rich peasant became richer, and the poor one, no matter how hard he tried, remained poor.

In time, the rich brother moved to a big town, prospered, and built a large house. He lacked nothing.

And the poor brother? Well, soon there was no money or food in his house, and often the family went to bed without even a crust of bread to eat. His wife nagged him bitterly, his children—small, smaller, smallest—wailed nonstop from hunger and deprivation.

Unable to endure his troubles any longer, the poor

peasant said to his wife one day, 'I am going to the town, to my brother's. Surely he will help me.'

He arrived at his brother's doorstep and said, 'Ah! Brother! I am going through a difficult time.'

'Work for me for a week and then we'll see,' replied his brother.

What could the poor brother do? He cleaned the courtyard, groomed the horses, fetched water, chopped firewood, lit the fire, cleared the snow, and did a myriad other chores. From morning to midnight he toiled. After a week, his brother gave him a lump of black rye bread, a few kopecks, and bid him farewell.

'Here, this is for your labour.'

'Thank you,' the muzhik said, and started for home.

'Wait!' the rich brother stopped him. 'Tomorrow I am celebrating my imeniny, my name-day. Why don't you come for it. Bring your wife too,' he said.

'O brother! How *can* I? Your guests, all rich merchants, will arrive in furs and boots, and I have only this tattered old grey caftan and worn-out bark shoes.'

'Never mind, come, there will be place for you too.'

'All right, brother, I'll be there.'

The peasant returned home, gave his wife the bread and said, 'Listen, babyshka, tomorrow we have been invited to a party.'

'What? By whom?'

'By my brother. For his name-day celebration.'

'Well, let's go then.'

So the next day, they went to the rich brother's house. They congratulated him and sat at a table in a corner. The party was a grand affair. All the wealthy people of the town were there. The rich brother fawned over them, laughed uproariously at their lame jokes, served them a lavish feast, filled their glasses with the finest vodka and kvass, and completely forgot about his poor brother and his wife. He did not offer them a thing. The two just sat and looked at everyone enjoying, eating and drinking heartily.

The party wound up by late evening, and the guests got into their fancy carriages, singing and laughing as they made their way home. To make sure that no one should see them sad, unfed and unnoticed, the poor brother said to his wife, 'Come, let us sing, too.'

'Ach, you fool!' said she. 'The others are singing because they've eaten well and, had a good time. Why should we sing?'

'Well, after all, it's my brother's name-day. Besides if we sing, everyone will think we've feasted like them.'

'Sing away then, if you like, but I won't!'

So pretending to be in high spirits, the poor brother started to sing along. Suddenly he stopped. A high-pitched voice very close to him was imitating

his song. He shot a glance at his wife, but she trudged along wearing her hard, pinched look. Were his ears ringing? Who was it? He looked around, and there he saw it. Hovering on his shoulders was a small creature with high cheekbones, bulbous eyes and yellowing skin, smirking at him.

'Who are you?' the poor brother asked, petrified.

'I am Gore-Gorinskoe, Woeful-Woe, master. And now that I have found you, I'm never going to let you go.'

He leapt on the poor muzhik's shoulder and said, 'C'mon, let's go together, you and I, tra-la-la-la.'

So they walked on home together.

Woeful-Woe said to the poor muzhik, 'Listen, I'm thirsty, you're thirsty, both utterly woeful. Let's go to the nearest kabak, a pub, for a drink.'

'But I have no money! How will I pay?'

'O sweet little muzhik! What do you need money for? See, you are wearing a sheepskin jacket, aren't you? Summer will be here soon and you won't need it anymore! So off with the jacket and let's go ...'

So they went to the kabak and drank the jacket away.

The next day the peasant awoke with a headache. As he squinted his eyes open, he saw Woe sitting by his side. Woe gleefully said, 'Let's go, dear friend, let's go and drink our headache away.'

'But there is no money,' said the peasant.

'What do we need money for? Take your cart and sledge, we'll get plenty for them.'

Day after day after day, the peasant found himself in the kabak with Woe stuck to him like a leech. Within a month, he had sold off his plough and harrow, his hut was pledged to the neighbour, and even his wife's sarafans weren't spared. Everything had been drunk away at the kabak.

The poor man began to tire out. 'I am cleaned out. Now I have truly nothing left,' he thought.

Next morning, Woe said to the muzhik, 'Master, go and borrow a cart and oxen from your neighbour.'

The muzhik went and requested his neighbour, 'Please give me your pair of oxen and cart. I have no money but I can do a week's worth of work for you in return.'

'What do you need them for?'

'To collect firewood from the forest.'

'All right, take them, but see that you don't tire them out.'

'What are you saying, good provider? Of course I won't.'

So the muzhik and Woe drove to the open plain.

'Master,' said Woe, 'do you know the huge stone in the middle of the plain?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Go straight to it then.'

They reached it, stopped and clambered off the cart. Woe told the muzhik, 'Lift the stone up!' The muzhik tried, Woe gave him a hand, and the two, straining together, heaved it aside. When the pit was opened, the peasant saw a heap of gold gleaming within.

'What are you staring at?' Woe snapped, shaking the muzhik out of his shock. 'Quickly, get the gold and load it in the cart.'

The muzhik jumped and did as he was told. Then, thinking with a clear head after many days, he said, 'Dear Woe, see, there's something left inside. Only your nimble fingers can get it out.'

Woe peered inside, 'Where? I can't see anything.'

'There, in the corner.'

'I don't see anything.'

'Go inside, then you will see it.'

Woe climbed down into the pit, and as soon as he was in it, the muzhik rolled the boulder over the hole and shut it tight.

'It is better like this,' he thought. 'If I took Woe home with me, he would only fritter away all this gold too, in the kabak.'

He drove home, returned the cart and oxen and stored the gold in his cellar.

The muzhik invested the gold wisely. He entered a trade which flourished, built a grand house and became twice as rich as his brother. Luck had smiled on him at long last.

One day, we do not know whether after a long or short time, he too decided to celebrate his name-day, and went into town to invite his brother and wife.

The rich brother was amused. 'What are you thinking? You have nothing to eat and you want to have a name-day party?'

'Yes, once I did not have even a crust to eat, but today, with God's grace, my fortunes are no less than yours. Come and see for yourself.'

'Fine, I will come.'

The next day, the rich brother and his wife arrived for the name-day. They saw that the poor brother had a house as grand as only a few merchants in the town had. The muzhik played the gracious host and welcomed them warmly. He served them wonderful delicacies and gave them mead and wine to drink.

Unable to contain his curiosity, the rich brother said, 'How has all this happened?' he said gesturing to the house and party. 'What is the secret to your fortune?'

The muzhik narrated the whole saga of how

Woe had befriended him, how they had drunk away everything he had owned, save his soul. He told him how Woe had taken him to an open field and shown him a treasure, and how he had finally escaped from Woe's clutches.

The rich brother felt sick with envy, and thought, 'I will go to the open field and release Woe from the pit. It will attach itself to my brother and destroy him again. Then I won't have to endure his bragging anymore.'

To his wife he said, 'Carry on home, dear. I will follow later.' Soon he took leave of his brother and hurried to the open field.

He found the stone, eagerly pushed it aside and peered in. As soon as he did that, Woe jumped out and perched upon his shoulders.

'You wicked fellow, you left me here to rot. Now that I have found you again, I'll never let you go.'

'No, no, this is a misunderstanding,' reasoned the brother. 'It was not me, but my brother who left you under the stone. I have come to free you. Attach yourself to my brother again and take him to the kabak.'

But Woe shook his head and said, 'No, it is you who needs me now! You are so doleful I can sniff your misery. I know who I belong to. Earlier your brother was my master, but now it will be you.' He gripped the brother tightly and chimed, 'To the kabak, let's go. A glass of

kvass is all we need and things will look so much better, you'll see.' So the brother had no choice but to drag his heavy burden home.

In the days to follow, Woe caused him nothing but misery and misfortune. He lost his wealth, his standing in society, and no matter how hard he tried to set things right, luck never looked his way again.

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there lived a tsar and his wife. One day the tsar died, and a few months later the tsaritsa fell ill. As she lay in a moribund state, she called her son, Ivan, and said, 'Son, when I am gone, look after your sisters, the tsarevnas Maria, Olga and Anna. Make sure they marry well. Do not waste time or hesitate when suitors arrive.' Ivan promised to do all this, and shortly after she died peacefully.

Tsarevich Ivan buried his mother according to customary rites, and after the funeral called his sisters

for a walk in the garden. 'Come Maria, Olga and Anna, let us soothe our aching hearts. The peace and beauty of the garden will help us forget the grief that lies heavy upon us.'

As Ivan and his sisters strolled about in the garden, each lost in thought, the sky suddenly turned dark and thunder rumbled ominously.

'A storm is imminent,' shouted Ivan. 'Let us go inside quickly before it comes.'

They dashed for shelter, and had barely entered the palace hallway when a blaze of lightning tore down the ceiling, and in flew a raven flapping its wings. It swooped down, and striking the floor, was instantly transformed into a tall youth with hair the colour of a dark moonless night, and with eyes like the deep blue sea. He bowed to the huddled siblings and said, 'Greetings, Tsarevich Ivan. I come as a suitor for your beautiful sister, Maria.'

Ivan, his parents' words echoing in his mind, said, 'O Raven, prince from a faraway kingdom, I accept your offer, but first you must get my sister's consent.

'Maria, clearly captivated, agreed, and the two were wed with much pomp and festivities. The raven then carried her away to his tsartsvo far away.

Hours chased hours, days changed into months, and before long a whole year had passed.

One day, Ivan, Olga and Anna were walking to the stables for a horse ride, when suddenly a whirlwind arose and lightening crisscrossed the sky.

'A storm is brewing. Let's run back to the palace!' yelled Ivan.

They had just reached inside when a fierce gale shattered a window and a falcon flew in. It made a graceful landing and turned into a broad youth with tawny eyes and hair the colour of a birch tree in autumn. He smiled at the frightened noble siblings and said, 'Greetings, Prince Ivan! I come to propose marriage to your lovely sister Olga.'

Olga smiled her approval and the deed was done.

Another year passed, as time often passes, imperceptibly, and Ivan, suffering a little ennui, proposed a walk in the garden to Anna. As they meandered about, reminiscing of times gone by, a hailstorm started without warning. They had just reached the shelter of their porch when a majestic eagle flew towards them and, before their very eyes, transformed into a gallant youth, with hair a glistening gold and eyes like emerald malachite. He said, 'Greetings, Tsarevich Ivan. I am here for your little sister, Anna. If she will have me, I will marry her with your blessings.'

Ivan looked at his sister and saw that she blushed like a rose at dawn. He arranged their wedding and said

farewell to them as they flew to the eagle's land far away.

A year went by. Ivan often thought of his sisters and that by what serendipity he had been able to fulfil his parents' wish. He felt free and content. He found ways to amuse himself, and for a while he was happy. Then he began to miss his sisters and could not shake off a sense of loneliness. So he decided to seek them out. He prepared for the journey and set off.

Riding for many days, Ivan came to an open steppe where he saw a sight that chilled him. Strewn all over the vast field were disembodied corpses. Birds of prey circled the sky and an eerie silence filled the air. Steeling himself, he shouted, 'If there is anyone here still alive, speak up and tell me who caused this carnage.'

Before his voice had faded, a man, barely breathing, answered, 'This huge army was destroyed by Marya Morevna, the warrior queen. She wreaked this destruction on her enemy.'

Ivan crossed himself and rode on. Just beyond the battleground, he came to a campsite fluttering with white tents. He stopped there and was taken to the tent of Marya Morevna.

'Welcome to our camps,' said Marya to Ivan. She looked free and wild like the untamed sea. 'Who are you? And where are you going? Are you here by your

own will or against it?' she asked imperiously.

And this is how Tsarevich Ivan replied: 'Brave men don't travel against their will, Marya Morevna. I am exactly where I want to be. By my will I come and by my will I go. I am Tsarevich Ivan.'

Marya Morevna, the warrior queen smiled. 'Well, if you are in no hurry, then stay here as my guest, Tsarevich Ivan. Rest awhile and tell me your story,' she said.

Ivan stayed and told her his life's story. They talked of many things, and in due course, fell in love with each other and married. Marya took Ivan to her palace and there they lived in comfort, content in each other's company.

Seasons passed, and one day Marya said to Ivan, 'Dear Ivan, I have to go to war again. I leave you in charge of matters here. Do as you please, go where you want. But I warn you—do not, at any cost, open the door to the cellar.'

Ivan listened carefully and promised.

After she left, he wandered about, and one day, unable to resist anymore, stood in front of the very door he had been warned not to open. He slowly slid the bolt, opened the door and entered. As he tiptoed into the palpitating darkness, and his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw before him a strange sight.

A man, his bones etched sharply against thin

flesh, was stretched out against the wall. Twelve chains restrained his wrists, ankles, neck and waist. His clothes fell in tatters over his body. His head was slumped on his scrawny chest and his wild mane flowed into his long, straggly grey beard.

Suddenly, the creature raised his head and looked straight into Ivan's eyes. Ivan was shaken by the brilliance and anger in those intense eyes, and tried to step back. But it was as though he was pinned by the gaze and couldn't move. From beneath craggy brows the man peered at him, eyes hooded now, unblinking, reptilian. In a hoarse whisper he said, 'Give me water. I am thirsty.'

'Who are you?' whispered Ivan.

The hideous creature jangled his chains. 'Give me water. My throat is so dry I can barely talk.'

Ivan, scared witless, brought him a basin of water. The creature drank three basinfulls with loud slurping noises.

'You are a fool, Ivan,' he said, smirking at him, revealing his large crooked teeth. 'For ten years I have been shackled by Marya Morevna. But now you have set me free.'

He tugged at the chains that held him. They crackled and turned to dust. He stood up straight, stretched out his arms and feet, and slowly, in front of Ivan's eyes, his muscles and limbs expanded. In a voice

deeper than the deepest darkness, he said, 'What a mistake you have made, Ivan, by helping me. I am an immortal, the Deathless Koshchei, and I am going to capture your beautiful wife, Marya, and you will see her sooner than you can see your ears.'

He laughed wildly, and turning into a whirlwind, flew out the high window into the night. He swirled to Marya riding to war, lifted her off and flew to his palace in a remote valley.

When full realisation dawned on Ivan, he fell on the floor and wept piteously. He was furious with himself for not listening to his wife, for being tricked thus, and desolate at the thought of losing her. Now there was only one thing left to do—go after Koshchei and fight him for his wife. He prepared for the journey and set off.

Tsarevich Ivan wandered on, over mountains and plains, looking for Marya. One day, he saw a palace in the distance. Near the palace, on an ancient oak tree, sat a raven, watching the traveller draw near. Ivan had accidentally found the raven's kingdom. The raven flew down, struck the earth and became a handsome man. He ran toward Ivan. 'Well, hello, dear brother-in-law!' he said. 'It is the grace of God that brings you here.'

Maria came out to meet her brother. Oh what a joyful reunion they had! Ivan stayed with them for three days. He told them about Marya and how Koshchei had

kidnapped her. When it was time to leave he said, 'Wish me luck to find Marya.'

'It is hard to trace Koshchei,' said the raven tsar. 'But before you depart, give us your silver spoon. We will look at it and remember you.'

Tsarevich Ivan gave the raven his silver spoon and resumed his journey.

After travelling for a few days, Ivan came to a grand old castle. Near the castle stood a tall birch upon which sat a falcon. The falcon saw Ivan coming, flew to the ground, and striking it became a handsome youth. He said, 'Come quick, Olga Tsarevna! Look, our dear beloved brother is here!'

Together they gave him a warm reception. The siblings spent time catching up, but soon it was time for Ivan to leave.

'I cannot stay here any longer,' he said. 'I must go and seek my wife, Marya Morevna.'

'It will be almost impossible to wrest Marya away from Koshchei,' said the falcon tsar. 'But give us your silver fork. We will look at it and remember you.'

Ivan left his fork with them and started on his way.

After a few days, he came to a palace. By the palace stood a gnarled oak tree on which sat an eagle. He flew down from the oak, hit the earth, became a handsome man, and shouted excitedly, 'Anna Tsarevna, hurry out!

Our beloved brother is here!'

Anna was delighted to see her brother. They feasted and celebrated and exchanged notes about their lives. Then, before he left, the eagle tsar said, 'Your mission is hard, Tsarevich. It is not easy to vanquish Koshchei. But give us your silver snuffbox before you go. We will look at it and remember you.'

So the tsarevich gave them his snuffbox and left.

One day, Ivan finally chanced upon the palace of Koshchei the Deathless. He crept inside surreptitiously, going from room to room, looking for Marya. When he found her, they fell into each other's arms, elated to be united after losing all hope of ever meeting again. Koshchei was out hunting.

'Oh Ivan! I have missed you so. Why did you have to disobey me?' Marya cried. 'What are we going to do now?'

'Forgive me, my love. Let bygones be bygones. Come now and let's run before Koshchei comes back,' said Ivan.

And so they fled.

At dusk, Koshchei galloped homeward. All of a sudden his horse jerked to a halt and pawed the ground.

'Why do you stop, old horse?' Koshchei demanded. 'Are you just plain stupid or do you sense danger?'

The horse replied, 'I stop to tell you that Tsarevich Ivan has been to your palace and taken Marya Morevna away.'

'Ah ha, can we catch them, good steed?'

'Master, we can sow wheat, wait till it ripens, reap it, thresh it, make flour, bake five ovens of bread, eat the bread with caviar, go in pursuit, and still catch them.'

Koshchei did not need to hear more. He steered his horse onto the road taken by the fleeing couple and overtook them soon enough.

'Well, well, well,' leered Koshchei. 'What's this? Did I not tell you that you will never see Marya again? This time I will let you go, Ivan, for you were kind to me. The second time too, I will let you go. But if I catch you a third time, beware, I will hack you into tiny pieces.'

He grabbed Marya Morevna and led her away.

Tsarevich Ivan, heartbroken, sat on a stone and wept. But one can cry only so much, and after a while, he stood up and went back for Marya Morevna. Creeping into the palace, he found her. 'Hurry Marya, let's go while Koshchei is away.'

'But, Tsarevich Ivan, he will overtake us!'

'Let him overtake us; at least we will have a few hours together. It is better than being scared and not doing anything at all.'

Marya agreed and they took off again.

Dusk fell. Koshchei the Deathless returned home after a long day of hunting. He urged his horse faster, the wind flying in his face, when suddenly the steed jerked to a halt.

'Why do you shilly-shally, foolish horse? Did a stone poke you, or is there mischief afoot?'

'Trouble enough, master. Tsarevich Ivan has come and carried Marya Morevna away.'

'Hmm. Can they be overtaken?'

'Master, we can sow barley, wait for it to ripen, harvest it, thresh it, and make beer from it, drink the beer, take a nap, and still catch them.'

So Koshchei turned his wise steed around and soon caught up with Ivan.

'Tsarevich Ivan, this is the last time I will allow you to walk away unscathed. The next time you take Marya Morevna away, I will have to chop you up.' So saying, he bade Marya sit on his horse and led her to his palace.

An anguished Ivan sat by the side of the road and wept bitter tears. He was scared and tired but his feet followed his heart, and soon he was back at the palace of the deathless monster. Like before, Koshchei was out hunting.

'Let us go, Marya Morevna.'

'Ah! Tsarevich Ivan, how can I, knowing that this time Koshchei will kill you?'

'Let him kill me then, but I cannot live without you.' So they got ready and left.

The sun was setting as Koshchei the Deathless rode home. Enjoying a good ride, he was annoyed when his steed stumbled. 'Why do you stumble, you sorry stallion, or has Ivan come and taken Marya Morevna away again?'

'That is exactly what I sense, master,' answered his clairvoyant horse.

Koshchei spurred his horse on and caught up with Tsarevich Ivan. He pulled out his sword and hacked Ivan into small bits. Then he put all the bits in a barrel and sealed it tight with resin and iron hoops. Then taking the barrel to the sea, he threw it into the middle and waited for it to sink to the bottom. Marya Morevna he took home.

At that precise moment, the silver spoon, fork and snuffbox that Ivan had left with the avian kings, turned black.

'Oh no,' they said, 'evil has certainly befallen Ivan! He needs our help.'

The raven flew off to the blue sea, dived into its depth, found the barrel and dragged it ashore. The falcon flew in search of the Water of Death, and the eagle for the Water of Life. All three, their tasks completed, met and together prised open the barrel. They took out the pieces of Tsarevich Ivan, washed

them and arranged them together in proper order. The falcon sprinkled them with the Water of Death—the pieces joined together and the body became whole. The eagle sprinkled the body with the Water of Life.

Ivan Tsarevich shuddered, stood up, and said, 'Oh my, how long have I been sleeping!'

'You would have slept forever had it not been for us,' answered his brothers-in-law.

'Come with us now and be our guest,' they said.

'No, brothers, I have to go to Marya Morevna,' said Ivan, and started for Koshchei's dismal ramparts once more.

Seeing him alive, Marya ran out and threw herself on his neck.

'How can this be?' she cried. 'I saw you die with my own eyes.'

'In this way and that way,' Ivan said, telling her everything that had transpired.

This time Ivan had a plan to escape Koshchei for good. 'Marya,' he instructed, 'find out where Koshchei the Deathless got his steed.'

Marya Morevna seized a favourable moment, and asked Koshchei about the steed.

'Beyond the thrice-nine land, in the thrice-ten kingdom, beyond the fiery river, lives Baba Yaga. She has mares on which she flies around the world each

day. I did her service once as a herdsman for three days. Because I did not lead astray even a single one of her mares, she gave me a colt.'

'You said there was a river of fire to cross to get to Baba Yaga's house? How on earth did you cross that?' asked Marya.

'Oh! That was easy. I have a handkerchief that conjures up a bridge when I wave it to the right three times. The bridge is so lofty that fire cannot reach it.'

Marya Morevna listened attentively, feigning admiration at the immortal tsar's ingenuity, but as soon as he went to sleep, she stole the magical handkerchief and gave it to Tsarevich Ivan.

Tsarevich Ivan set forth for Baba Yaga's. For days he travelled, with nothing to eat or drink on the way.

One day he came across a bird from beyond the sea guarding her young ones. 'I'll eat one little chick,' thought Ivan, reaching out to the nest.

'Please don't eat my chick, Tsarevich Ivan,' begged the bird. 'In time I will do you a good deed.'

He felt sad for the bird and agreed. Going further, he passed a forest which was swarming with bees. 'I'll take some honey, that should revive me,' thought he.

Just as he went up to the hive, the queen bee called out, 'Please leave my honey alone, Tsarevich Ivan. In time I will do you a good deed.'

He agreed reluctantly. Going further, he saw a lioness playing with her cub in the meadow.

'Ah, at last I can eat something,' he thought. If I don't eat soon, I'll faint.' He grabbed the cub.

'Please Tsarevich Ivan, let go of my cub,' pleaded the lioness. 'In time I will do you a good deed.' Ivan, feeling sorry for her, consented. He walked on hungry.

At last Ivan came to the river of fire. It was roiling and throwing up sparks and smoke. He took out the magic handkerchief and waved it thrice to the right. Lo and behold, a lofty bridge sprung up all the way to the other bank. He crossed it and came to Baba Yaga's abode.

Her hut stood on chicken legs. Circling it was a fence with twelve stakes dug into the ground. On eleven heads of men dangled; the twelfth was unoccupied.

As the hut turned round to face him, he peered within and saw the ancient hag, Baba Yaga, sharpening her iron teeth at the stove.

She looked at him and screeched, 'What brings you here, Tsarevich Ivan?'

'Zdrastvitye, dear grandmother. I come here of my own sweet will. Accept my services as a herdsman and reward me with a noble steed,' said Ivan, resisting the urge to turn around and run.

'All right, Tsarevich Ivan. I will make you my herdsman, entrust my wondrous mares to your care. If

you prove yourself able, I will give you a steed, but if you lose any, don't complain when I chop off your head to decorate my twelfth vacant stake.'

Ivan accepted the deal. What choice did he have? He ate, rested, and early next morning took the mares to the meadows. As soon as they reached the green grass, the mares cocked up their tails and galloped off, completely disappearing from sight. Ivan did not know where to look for them. Perplexed and heavy-hearted, he flopped down on the grass, eyes heavy with tears, and fell asleep. The sun was setting when the sea bird whose chick he had spared, roused him.

'Wake up, Tsarevich Ivan, and go home. The mares are back in their stable.'

Ivan went to the hut and there were the mares. He heard Baba Yaga raging at them. 'Why have you come home, you foolish beasts?'

'What else could we do? We ran away, like you told us, vanished from his sight, but hundreds of birds flew at us from nowhere and all but pecked our eyes out.'

'Well, don't go galloping in the open tomorrow,' she advised them, 'run to the dense forest instead.'

Next morning Baba Yaga warned Ivan, 'Make sure that you don't lose a single mare today, Tsarevich, or your curly head will adorn my stake.'

Ivan drove the mares out, and again, as before,

they cocked up their tails and dashed into the thick forest. The weary tsarevich sat down on a stone, put his head down and fell asleep. It was twilight when the lioness whose cub Ivan had saved, ran up. 'Arise, Tsarevich Ivan, the mares are safely home.'

Ivan stood up and went to the hut. There stood the mares, heads hanging down as Baba Yaga screamed blue murder at them. 'Whatever did you come back home for, you good-for-nothing animals?'

'What choice did we have? We hid in the deepest forest as you instructed, but thousands of wild beasts ran at us, their fangs bared and all but tore us to pieces.'

'Well, wade into the sea tomorrow, you fools,' said Baba Yaga disgustedly.

The night passed uneventfully. Next morning as Ivan prepared to herd the mares, Baba Yaga said to him, 'Remember Ivan, this is your last day. If any of my mares is found missing, I will wrench your head off and stick it into the empty stake.'

The mares reached the field, and as planned, cocked up their tails, and waded into the blue sea. There they stood in water upto their necks.

Tsarevich Ivan sat on a stone and dozed off. A bee buzzed in his ear and roused him at dusk. 'Tsarevich Ivan,' it said, 'the mares are secured. Go back now, but not to the

hut. Tonight Baba Yaga should not see you. Go to the stable and hide behind the manger. There is a scabby little colt lying on a dung heap. Steal it and, at midnight, leave!'

Ivan thanked the bee and made his way to the stable. He lay down behind the manger, and listened to Baba Yaga shrieking at her mares. 'Why did you come home, you skinny bones?' she roared.

'What else could we do?' they neighed. 'We waded into the sea, away from beast and bird, but millions of bees, seen and unseen, swarmed upon us and began to sting us. We almost bled to death!'

Baba Yaga, muttering abuses, retired for the night. When the midnight hour struck, Ivan rose and went to the manger where he found the scabby colt. He saddled it and quietly led it away.

When Ivan came to the fiery river, he shook the magic handkerchief three times on the right side, and a high, crystal bridge sprung up. He crossed, waved the handkerchief on the left side twice, and the splendid bridge shrunk into a ribbon.

When Baba Yaga awoke the next morning, she discovered both the scabby colt and Ivan missing. She jumped into her iron mortar, and with all her breath pushed the pestle forward. Gaining momentum, she yelled and took off in pursuit, her broom sweeping away the trail behind. When she reached the fiery river,

she saw a ribbon of a bridge and thought, 'The bridge looks fine. Let me cross it.' She rode out on it, but when she reached the middle, the bridge gave way and Baba Yaga fell headlong into the river of fire. It would take her a long, long time to come out of it. But that's for another story.

Tsarevich Ivan took his colt to the green meadows to graze, and it soon became a marvellous steed. On it he rode to Koshchei's palace. Marya Morevna, the warrior queen, was overjoyed to see him and to know that their plan had worked. Ivan told her everything and said, 'Come now, let's run away on the new steed.'

'Gladly, Tsarevich Ivan, but, what if Koshchei catches us again?'

'No, now he cannot,' Ivan soothed her. 'Not if we ride on my new steed. It is glorious, heroic, and flies like a bird.'

They sat on the horse and rode off.

Koshchei the Deathless was coming home when his steed suddenly stopped, its hoof stalling in air.

'What now, brave charger?' Koshchei asked. 'It cannot be that Ivan has come and taken Marya Morevna away, eh? I hacked him, bound him in a barrel and threw him into his watery grave. And still you falter. Could it be ...?

'Yes, master. Tsarevich Ivan is alive and he has been

to your palace and taken away Marya Morevna.'

'Let's catch them this instant,' bellowed Koshchei.

'I am not so sure this time, master. The steed Ivan rides is much faster than I.'

'What? How is that possible?' Seethed Koshchei, red in the face. 'I don't give up easily. Prepare for a chase.'

Both riders rode hard, we do not know for how long or short a time, but eventually Koshchei caught up with Ivan.

He sprang to the ground, and lifted his sabre to cut Ivan. Just then, Ivan's horse, neighing wildly, stood up high on its hind legs and brought down its forelegs on Koshchei's skull.

There was a loud crack as though a mighty oak had fallen in the forest. The sound echoed as Koshchei rolled to the ground in agony, unable to rise.

Ivan then said to him, 'Begone now, and never return. If we ever meet, I will find a way to kill you, Deathless Tsar.'

Marya Morevna mounted Koshchei's horse and Ivan Tsarevich his own. They started for home, stopping on the way to visit the raven, the falcon, and the eagle, and with them they celebrated and rejoiced. At last they returned to their own tsarstvo where they lived and prospered for a long, long time.

The Seven Simeons

This is the story of seven brothers who shared the same name and were each blessed with a rare gift. This is how their tale goes.

Far far away, beyond mist-topped mountains, across cerulean seas, over golden sands and swiftly flowing streams, there rose a mighty kingdom. The tsar who ruled over this kingdom was a brave warrior, a good administrator, wealthy, and learned. He was also good-looking, witty and charming.

He had everything a man could ask for; there was nothing he lacked. But when the heart is lonely, its desires unfulfilled, all the riches in the world mean nothing.

Such was the tsar's condition. A restless longing for love had entered his heart. He felt an immense desire to find a wife with whom he could spend his life—a soulmate with whom he could share his kingdom, his riches, his tribulations and joys.

But where was he to find such a woman?

One day, as he sat gazing at the sea from his crystal window, lost in thought, he saw a ship sail into the harbour. The seafarers threw in the anchor and came ashore, and a wave of excitement rippled all around. The tsar was struck by a thought.

'Bring the sea merchants to the palace,' he commanded his men.

Arriving before the tsar, the merchants bowed and curtseyed politely.

'Tell me, esteemed men, have you travelled wide and far?'

'Yes, sir, we have. Most of our lives have been spent on the seas, trading with lands far and exotic,' replied the oldest.

'And have you on foreign shores met a woman who is beautiful and wise enough to be my wife? A woman who can sit beside me on the throne and rule?' asked the tsar.

The men thought for a while, then one of them slowly answered, 'We have come across many beauties

in our times, but on our last travel we heard of a maiden who is lovelier than dawn and wise beyond her years. Over the oceans, across many isles, lies a kingdom, ruled by a hard and stern king. It is his daughter, Helena, we speak of.'

The tsar conversed with the men for a long time. As they described Helena to him, her wit, erudition, charm and grace, wove a spell of enchantment around the tsar, and he was besotted.

At length, he asked, 'Tell me, good traders, where is her country? How can I reach there?'

The men looked down at their feet and fell silent. Then, finally, one of them spoke. 'Your royal highness, it is unfortunate, but Helena cannot be yours.'

There was a stunned silence as the words echoed in the court hall, and then all hell broke loose. All the attending boyars and ministers gasped. There was anger and indignation. But the tsar, an even-tempered man, looked amused and enquired what they meant.

'The truth is that Helena's country is so very far away from yours that it will take ten years to just reach it and, with rough seas, even longer. Ten years to return. Ah, beauty and youth are but birds of passage, and Helena's no exception.'

The tsar listened attentively. 'Good men, you have been useful. I wish you luck on your journeys ahead.

Do good trade, and farewell to you.' So saying, he dismissed them.

The seafarers' words lay heavy on the lovestruck tsar. But pushing aside his feelings, he returned to the task of running his kingdom.

Days passed, seasons came and went, but the tsar could not erase Helena from his mind. A tune once stuck in the mind's groove does not go away easily, and thoughts of Helena, of sharing a life with her, haunted the tsar. His poor heart ached with the unfairness of life and he prayed for a miracle.

One day, riding through the countryside, the tsar saw a field of wheat shimmering like gold in the sunlight. It was a clear morning—birds chirped, trees wore new tender leaves, and people worked busily in the fields.

'Whose fields are those?' he asked the convoy of men accompanying him. 'Let us go meet the muzhik who has wrought such magic!'

His messengers went to the field and returned with seven strapping youths. All were strikingly similar, and anyone could tell they were brothers. Tall and broad, their skin the colour of burnished copper, their hair the colour of ripening wheat, their eyes bright and sparkling like summer streams, they were a feast for the eyes. A soft breeze ruffled their hair as they walked

with an easy gait, their open smiles belying their hard life. Coming up to the tsar, they bowed low.

'Young men, your diligence is impressive. I am delighted to see the passion you have for what you do,' said the tsar.

'You are too kind, Your Majesty. Farming is our life's work, our source of joy and pride. Our parents taught us that,' said one of them.

'We have lived here since birth,' said another. We love this land and take pleasure in the simple country life.'

'Where are your parents? And what are your names, fine lads?' said the tsar, enjoying the exchange.

'We all go by the name of Simeon,' one replied. 'Our parents died long ago.'

'Your parents taught you well, sons. I wish all my men lived by your high standards.' Then after a pause, he added, 'Have you any other skills?'

'We have no formal training,' replied one Simeon, 'but each of has a gift our parents helped us perfect.'

'And what is that?' asked the tsar, his curiosity piqued.

'Our gifts are somewhat unique. They exist in pairs. If one uses his gift successfully, then only can the other use his!'

The tsar asked them to elaborate.

'I can build a pillar reaching for the skies and beyond,' began the eldest Simeon. 'And I can scale the pillar, see afar and know what is happening anywhere,' completed the second Simeon.

The third and the fourth Simeons standing close together, said, 'Water is our forté.'

'My skill enables me to build a ship so quick and swift that it can fly on water,' started the third. 'And I can grab the ship by the prow and sink it deep into the eternal quiet of the ocean bed, and bring it up when the storm passes and the enemy has left,' finished the fourth brother.

The fifth Simeon hesitated, then said, 'My hands can make a gun and shoot unerringly at any target under the sun.' To which added the sixth brother, 'And I can catch what he shoots even before it can touch the ground.'

The tsar, amazed at the talents of these clever men, proclaimed, 'Come with me to my court, dear Simeons. I would like to introduce you to my wise men. You can perhaps exchange notes with them, teach them what you know. And when it is time for you to harvest your fields, I will gladly let you go.'

'Your wish is our command,' they replied.

But as they started, the tsar, remembering he had missed one, stopped. 'And what is your special gift, seventh Simeon?'

The seventh Simeon said, 'My talent is ordinary. I tried to develop another, but was best-suited for this one.'

'And what is that?'

'You must assure me first that when I disclose my talent, you will treat me with kindness and guarantee my pardon.'

The tsar promised.

'I excel at stealing. Nothing in the world is safe from me. I can find anything, it may be hidden in the deepest darkest place or have a spell put on it by the craftiest wizard, but I will find it and take it, without leaving the tiniest trace. So now you know, theft is what I'm good at.'

The confession shocked the tsar. In his kingdom, theft was a serious offence, and thieves were meted out the highest punishment. He had no choice but to break his promise.

'I am bound by the law to imprison you. You have a dangerous talent and I cannot let you roam free. Guards, bind him and take him to the prison and keep him there till I decide what to do with him.'

The seventh Simeon protested that it was only an innate talent, never used for greed or in jest.

But the tsar was adamant, and off they all went to the palace. Six Simeons were given sumptuous living quarters, and the seventh incarcerated.

The next day, the tsar had all the required materials and tools put at the disposal of the six brothers, and he bid them start their work.

A thunderous sound of industry filled the town as the brothers hammered, crafted, bent, measured and shaped a pillar, a ship and a gun.

One day, as the Simeons were resting, a messenger came into their rooms. 'Hurry up, the tsar wishes to see you at once.'

Putting on their jackets and caps, the brothers ran through the corridor that led to the court. The tsar was pacing the hall, his eyes shining with excitement.

As soon as the Simeons walked in, he rushed up to them. 'How long will your work take to be completed?'

'It's almost done, sire; by tonight all will be ready,' they answered.

'I have a task for each one of you.'

The tsar had at last found a way to get his beloved Helena. Why of course, he would use the talents of the Simeons. Only they could perform this miracle for him.

'Tomorrow I want you to prepare for a mission. I wish to marry Helena, and you will bring her to me as fate has brought you to me.'

'You have our promise; we will risk all to succeed in the endeavour,' replied the brothers sincerely.

Next morning, the tower was completed, and the

second Simeon started climbing. Up and up he went, till he was a mere speck to the people watching below. Clouds floated underneath him, the air turned chilly, he was above the highest mountains, and still further he went. Many hours later, he descended.

'What did you see?' asked the tsar.

'I saw many, many wonderful and frightening things. There were immense battlefields where brave soldiers clashed swords with each other. There were havens of peace and tranquillity where the arts and music flourished. But the most beautiful thing I saw was Tsarevna Helena taking a stroll in her garden. Watching her I felt all my tiredness leave me. When she smiled I felt joy bubble within me.'

'How did you know it was her?' asked the tsar.

'She was exactly as how you had described her to be. No suitor can approach Tsarevna Helena for her hand in marriage until he is able to perform certain tasks. And these tasks are so difficult that no one ever completes them. But her father is a tyrant and no one, in his eyes, is a match for her.'

The tsar heard everything and recalled similar words spoken by the seafarers. He summoned the third brother. 'Is your ship ready?'

'Yes, it is.'

'How long will it take to reach Helena's kingdom?'

'Ten days. My ship takes one day to cover what takes others a year.'

'Very well,' said the tsar.

He then turned to his advisors and asked, 'Wise men, give me your counsel. Should I launch an attack on Helena's kingdom or go in peace?'

The greybeards all looked away, trying not to catch the tsar's eyes.

'Is there not a seventh Simeon? Whose talent is to steal? Why don't we send him to get the princess?' cried out a voice from the back.

The tsar contemplated the suggestion, and reluctantly agreed to take this course.

'Bring the seventh Simeon immediately,' he said.

He told him the details of the story and asked, 'Can you bring Helena to me?'

'Why not? The task is easy enough.'

'If you are successful, I will grant you pardon. But if not, then God save you.'

The seventh Simeon agreed and asked that the ship be loaded with necklaces, bracelets, rings and brooches of pearls, diamonds, rubies and emeralds, gowns of silk and brocade, rugs from Persia, spices and fruits from Samarkand and India, books and musical instruments—the whole nine yards.

As he said, so was done.

The tsar bade goodbye to the brothers and prayed for their success. The ship was ready to sail. It touched the water and its sheer sails billowed in the wind. Then it gained speed and slowly transformed into a sleek white arrow. It shot through the water, and was a white dot on the horizon before completely vanishing from sight.

After ten days, the brothers dropped anchor at their destination and went ashore with their trunks full of treasures.

They went to the palace gate and said, 'We come from a kingdom far away. We have heard about the beauty of your tsarevna and have brought her treasures from all around the world.'

The princess was sitting in her terem, the ladies quarters, talking to her companions. Her long lustrous hair was the colour of flame, and when she smiled, deep dimples flashed on her flawless ivory skin and her eyes twinkled like stars in the night sky.

She noticed the handsome men at the gate and motioned the guards to let them in.

'Go, nyanya,' she said to her nurse. 'Bring them in and let us see what they have.'

The nurse and companions led the Simeons in. They showed the ladies brocades, silks and velvets, scattering precious jewellery here and there.

Helena looked with wide eyes at the treasures before her, her hands caressing the beautiful fabrics.

'Here, give these gowns to your maids,' said the seventh Simeon, and taking out a fistful of gems added, 'and the kitchen boys can play with these baubles. We have something better for you.'

'Is that so?'

'Certainly. But you have to come to our ship to see them as they are too precious to carry here.'

Helena took permission from her father who agreed on the condition that her retinue of friends and nurses would escort her. He called the captain of guards and said, 'Take ten of your best soldiers, arm them with the finest guns and cannons and tell them to station themselves on a fleet next to the merchants' ship. If anything happens to the tsarevna, your heads will be impaled.'

The tsarevna and her companions crossed the crystal bridge and climbed aboard the ship's deck. They were awestruck by everything they saw. The ship was like a golden bird, its sails like angel's wings in flight. A band was playing music in one corner. A cage held the most exquisite birds they had ever seen. Tulips and lilies bloomed in the garden in the deck's centre, and deer ambled, nibbling on grass.

The Simeons showed the royal entourage around.

They were enthralled as they went from room to room. Each room contained a different treasure. Everywhere there was a riot of colour, texture, glitter and perfume.

So absorbed were they that they did not notice that the ship had set sail a long time ago. Indeed, there had been a chase by the old tsar's guards, shots had been fired and cannons set loose. But the fourth Simeon had gently guided the ship into the calm womb of the sea where it presently rested.

When Helena became aware of the time she ran to the deck, but a deep blue wall of water closed her in. Fish darted curiously by the ship and all was quiet. She let out a piercing cry and beat her chest twice. Suddenly she became a white swan and flew high into the air. The fifth brother took his pistol and fired at her. The shot only grazed her wing, but it made her lose her balance and plummet down. Before she could fall, the sixth brother caught her in his arms. She became a gleaming fish and wriggled out of his grasp. She fell on the deck, turned into a tiny mouse and darted way. But before she could run into a hole, the brother, swifter than a cat, caught her and there she was—the bright-eyed Helena again!

Twenty days had passed since the brothers set sail. The tsar was at his window, wondering how they had fared. Gazing out at the sea he saw a white blur coming

closer. Like a large seagull it advanced, and he saw that it was the Simeons' ship.

Tsarevna Helena with her companions was ushered into the court, and everyone came out to see her. The tsar walked up to her and bowed. 'Dear Tsarevna, at last we meet. You are even more beautiful than I ever imagined. For years, I have waited for this moment.'

He got down on one knee and said, 'I have long given my heart to you. If you will have me, I wish to marry you and make you the tsaritsa of my kingdom. If not, I will ask the brave men who brought you here to escort you back to your father.'

Helena looked at the tsar, and when their eyes met, it was as though she too had been waiting for this moment all her life. She blushed a deep scarlet and nodded her assent.

'There is one thing I would like to do before we marry,' she said.

'Anything you wish,' replied the tsar.

'Extend our wedding invitation to my father as well.'

'I will send my men this instance.'

Helena then wrote her father a letter narrating the details of her journey, inviting him to her wedding and expressing her joy at the prospect of marrying the man of her dreams.

The seven Simeon brothers set off again to Helena's kingdom. When they arrived, the kingdom was in a state of mourning at the death of the tsarevna. Everyone believed that she had drowned at sea.

When the Simeons met the tsar and assured him otherwise and gave him her letter, the tsar's happiness knew no bounds.

'I have learned a big lesson. I thought I had lost my daughter to the sea. Because of my selfishness I didn't allow her to marry, I wanted to keep her by my side forever. I deprived her of the joy of love and marriage for so long. I am too old now to go across to your kingdom, Simeons, but tell her I am very happy and my blessings are with her always.'

The Simeons returned to their kingdom where grand preparations were being made for the royal wedding. When they arrived, they were made the guests of honour at the celebration. The tsar and his queen thanked them and showered them with gifts.

'Seven Simeons, you have our eternal gratitude. We will always remember you. Go now to your beloved gold fields. It is harvest-time. We shall meet again. Take as much silver and gold as you want, and if your wish is to become boyars or governors, so be it. I also grant pardon to the seventh Simeon. He is a free man!'

The Simeons smiled happily and said, 'Thank you,

good tsar, for your generosity, but we do not desire riches or titles. We only want to return to our farm and live peacefully and simply. We used our skills for a good cause and had a great adventure—that was reward enough for us.'

So saying, the seven strapping Simeons walked out of the door arm in arm.

And that is the end of my tale. She who listened is my own true friend.

That year the winter was particularly severe. The ground was covered with snow. For miles around there was a dazzling white blur that you could not look at without hurting the eyes. The sun barely came out, and if it did, it was only for a few short hours. Night fell swiftly and everyone huddled in their houses by the stoves.

It was on one such winter day that our story unfolds, in the house of a poor old man, his second wife, and their two daughters, each from a previous marriage. It was not a happy household. The wife was a nag, dissatisfied with everything. Her hard life had made her bitter and mean, and her only joy was her own daughter, Marfa,

who she cosseted and pampered beyond reason. She would stroke her hair affectionately and exclaim, 'What a clever girl you are, my darling. Such a beauty, my dear!'

As for her stepdaughter, Anastasia, she cared not a bit. She treated her like a maidservant and kept her busy all day running errands. Anastasia swept the house, fetched water, fed the cows. She was a good-natured girl and she did all her chores without complaining. But no matter what she did, she could not please her stepmother. She could never be good enough. The old woman was ever ready with a sharp reprimand. 'Not like this; that's no good! Go to bed without any dinner!'

Years passed in this manner and both the girls grew up and reached a marriageable age. And on that bleak, miserable winter day, as Anastasia was doing her usual chores, she slid on frozen snow and dropped the pail of water she was carrying. Something snapped inside her stepmother. She screeched at her husband and said, 'Take her, old man, somewhere far away. I cannot bear to hear or see her. Take her deep into the forest and leave her there.'

There is an old Russian proverb that goes something like this: 'The wind will howl, rage and storm, and then it will stop. But there is no stopping a cantankerous old woman when she starts.'

The old man begged his wife to change her mind, but she was adamant. Used to getting her way, she did not budge. 'It's for her own good. Maybe Morozko will take her as his bride!' she cried.

The old man sadly brought out his sled. 'Come, my sweet child, get into the sled,' he said to his daughter.

They travelled silently, far from the house, deep into the forest. There, on a snowdrift, under a huge spruce tree, he left her and quickly turned away so that he wouldn't have to see her freeze. He drove back home, tears blurring his vision.

Anastasia sat on the pile of frozen snow, numb to the soul, her teeth chattering from the cold. She looked around her—every needle, leaf, and branch hung heavy and white. It was as though colour had been banished from the world, wiped clean by the snow. A gale whistled through the trees shaking sharp icicles on her. Daylight was fading, turning a dismal grey; there was an air of anticipation in the air as though the forest was holding its breath till nightfall. Dreading the darkness, Anastasia crossed herself and recited all the prayers she knew.

A branch snapped under the weight of the snow like a shot fired from a gun. Anastasia huddled closer to the tree. The wind started up again, the trees moaned and groaned. Suddenly she heard a sound in the distance. Someone was approaching, crackling and snapping,

leaping from tree to tree. It was Morozko. There he was, on top of the very tree beneath which she sat.

He appeared before her, a huge iridescent silhouette of a man. Anastasia felt a chill go down her spine. She steeled herself and sat upright. Then the figure spoke, its voice a silvery whisper, 'Why, look who's here? Scared little girl, what are you doing so far away from home? What brings you to my kingdom? I am, as you know, the ruby-nose-maker, Tsar Morozko. Are you a sinner or sinned upon by someone? But most of all, tell me, are you warm, my little dove?'

Anastasia could barely speak. With rasping breath, she said, 'Greetings to you, Tsar Morozko, ruby-nose-maker. I am all right, thank you kindly for asking.'

As she spoke, the temperature dipped further, silent lightning streaked the sky, soft flakes began to fall afresh.

'How goes the weather now, my little dove. See my glory, do you like it? Does it make you feel colder yet?' asked Morozko again.

'Yes,' replied the girl, awe-struck by this force of nature, her bones chilled, 'it's beautiful, dear Father Morozko.'

Now darkness fell and Morozko gleamed even brighter. 'Little girl, are you warm enough to withstand my chill?'

'Yes, dear Morozko, crystal-maker, I am warm and well,' replied the girl, shrinking into a ball.

Morozko was pleased by the girl's answers, by her courage and respect in the face of nature's extreme grandeur. He wished to reward her. Suddenly Anastasia found herself wearing the warmest, softest jacket she had ever seen. Blood coursed in her veins again, her breath became even, and she felt revived. She sighed in contentment, 'Thank you, beloved Morozko.'

Morozko pointed a long icicle finger, and Anastasia following its direction saw a grand old wooden casket. 'Oh, what is this?' She pushed it open and gasped. Inside the cavernous box were things that every girl dreams about—fur-trimmed fashionable coats, hats and gloves, dresses, an exquisite wedding gown, pearl and diamond necklaces, bracelets and earrings, and a pair of high-heeled boots! The young girl had never seen such treasures before. She touched them and tried them on, a warm sense of joy and well-being filling her heart. Someone cared at last! Snuggling into her warm jacket, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Morozko looked at her indulgently and easing his ferocity, moved on through the forest gently, the trees whispering in his wake.

Next morning, the old woman was preparing blinis and pryanikis. She hollered to her husband, 'Wake up! Fetch your daughter's body and prepare for her funeral.'

The benumbed old man went. When he reached the forest, he saw on the snowdrift, his daughter, not dead but glowing. He helped her up and carted her box to the sled.

As their sled reached home, the stepmother came to the door. The smile on her lips froze when she saw Anastasia's radiant face. She dragged her husband to a corner and said, 'What is this? Did you give her the coat and that casket of riches?'

The old man replied, 'She got them in the forest.'

The woman, greedy and envious, ordered him to take her own daughter to the forest so that she too may receive such bounty. The old man retraced his path and left Marfa in the exact same spot.

Marfa had never had to leave the house in uncertain weather. And being alone in a forest in the middle of winter did not please her at all. Her teeth chattered with the cold and she sniffled petulantly in her sumptuous fur coat. Daylight faded, and she hoped the ordeal would soon be over. Before long she would be home, in front of the stove, eating some delicious cookies and strutting around in her new clothes. Preoccupied as she was in her thoughts, she did not hear the approaching sounds of Morozko, and was startled when the tree she was under swayed, spraying an armful of frozen icicles that stung her eyes. She looked up in irritation, and saw

a hazy crystal figure hovering above her. 'What's that?' she screamed.

'It is I,' replied a hollow voice, oddly gracious. 'I am Tsar Morozko, the ruby-nose-maker, the freezer-almighty. Welcome to my kingdom! What brings you hear, my dear?'

'It's of no concern to you, you old bones! Go away,' she replied crossly.

The wind howled menacingly, the forest became dark and the temperature dropped.

'You have quite a temper. Does it keep you warm, dear dove?' enquired Morozko.

'I am frozen, can't you see, you old croaker?' screeched the girl.

An ominous quiet descended and the girl peered to see if someone was coming to give her a casket of treasure.

Tsar Morozko came closer, he breathed in her face, colder and colder!

'Are you, my love?' he called. 'Are you warm, my pretty one?'

'No! I am frozen. Begone, you wretched Frost!'

Angry hail pelted Marfa, and her face turned blue.

When day dawned the woman hurried her husband out. 'Go, old man, bring back my daughter adorned in gold and silver!'

The old man hurried along and when he reached the tree, he found poor Marfa frozen stiff and dead. He carried her body to the cart and took her home, sad at the loss, not knowing what to say or think.

His wife was at the gate, excitedly shouting for her daughter, 'Come Marfa, let's go in together, I have made your favourite dishes.' She leapt onto the cart, and there she saw—Marfa's body. She fell off the cart onto the road below. And when she came to, she was in a state of shock. She was never to speak again or get out of her bed for as long as she lived.

Anastasia married in course of time, and when she wore her wedding dress, she thought of Father Morozko. And whenever winter came, she baked blinis, enjoyed the season and taught her children to respect nature.

When you stop and think about it, you realise how great this world of ours really is. In it live people who are rich, people who are poor, some that are big and some that are small. Everyone and everything has its place, and God looks after them all. There are some who live in luxury and some not-so-lucky ones who have to toil for every penny. To each his lot.

In a grand palace, up in a lofty tower, there once lived a young princess, Tsarevna Nesmeyana, also known as The-Princess-Who-Never-Smiled. Her life was like a fairy tale. She had everything a girl can ever dream of. All the luxuries, privileges and freedom were hers to enjoy. But though she had it all, she never smiled, she

never laughed. It was as though nothing ever gave her any joy at all.

Her father, the tsar, sad and worried to see his daughter so morose, decided to do something about it. He opened the doors of his palace wide and declared, 'Gentlemen, all are invited to my palace. You will wine and dine with me and enjoy every luxury. But there is one task you will have to accomplish, and that is to cheer up my daughter. He who can make her smile will be given her hand in marriage.'

No sooner were his words out than people started arriving at the palace gates in huge numbers. From every corner of the empire came all sorts—tsars and barons, boyars and nobles, soldiers and commoners. The feasting began, wine flowed like water, there was music and dance, but Tsarevna Nesmeyana looked as glum as ever.

Now it so happened that in a far off corner of the kingdom, lived an honest worker. Every day he awoke at the crack of dawn and cleaned the yard. At dusk he patiently herded the cattle in. All day long, he worked tirelessly, diligently and without a break. His master was a wealthy and upright man who knew a good worker when he saw one, and was a generous and just paymaster.

One day, a year since the worker had first started working, his master came up to him, and putting a bag

of money on the table, said, 'Take as much as you want!' Then he went out of the room and left the worker to decide his salary.

The worker walked up to the table and thought, 'I do not want to provoke God's wrath by taking more than my due. But how do I decide what I deserve?'

In the end he picked up a single coin and left. He went to a fountain to drink water, and as he bent down with scooped hands, his coin fell right in and sank to the bottom.

He was penniless once more. Another in his place would have wept, wallowed in despair and quit work altogether. But not our honest worker.

'Everything,' he thought, 'is God's will. He knows who to give to and who to take from. He makes the final decision. Perhaps I didn't work hard enough or well enough, perhaps that's why I didn't deserve the coin. But I will work harder now and make up!'

And he started working all over again with renewed passion.

Another year came to an end and once again his master put a bag of money on the table.

'Take,' he said, 'as much as your heart desires!' And so saying left the room.

Again the worker started thinking. He did not want to take more than he deserved, so he took a coin

and went to the fountain to drink. As he cupped his hands for water, the coin slipped out and sank without a trace.

Again he started to work from scratch. He toiled so tirelessly that he forgot at times to sleep at night or even eat a decent meal.

It's like this: there are some whose wheat withers in the field, some whose cattle curl their legs and are kicked in the street, and some whose horses have to be dragged downhill. Now some find this trying and give it all up, while some remain undeterred and keep going forward. The worker was the latter kind, and his master knew that it was to him he owed his well-being.

Another year came to an end, the third, and the master placed a bag of money on the table.

'Take, good man, as much as you desire. Yours was the labour, yours is the reward!' And he exited the room.

Again the worker took one coin, went to the fountain to drink, and even this time his coin fell, but it did not sink! It floated up along with the earlier two coins. He took them, assuming that God was rewarding him for his hard work. The recovery of his money put him in a very happy frame of mind, and he said to himself, 'It's time for me to see the wide world, meet other people and see how they live!'

So he took off and wandered as he pleased. He

picked a path and went wherever it led him.

One day, he was walking in a field when a small mouse with a sleek coat came running up to him.

'Dear fellow! Good man!' the mouse said. 'Give me a coin and I will help you later.'

The worker gave him a coin and walked on.

Some other day, he entered a forest and was walking through it, when an old beetle scuttled up to him.

'Dear fellow! Good man!' said the beetle. 'Give me a coin. I will be of use to you one day!'

The worker gave him a coin and walked on.

Another day, he came to a stream and was wading through it when a catfish with enormous whiskers swam up to him.

'Dear fellow! Good man!' said the catfish. 'Give me a coin. I will help you one day!'

The labourer agreed amiably and, without a moment's hesitation, gave him his last coin.

Then one day, the worker came to a city, and oh my! There were so many people, houses and steeples! He looked here and he looked there, he turned around and looked in every direction. Where he should go, he did not know. He felt quite dizzy. Before him stood the tsar's grand palace, embellished in silver and gold. He looked up and saw at the window Tsarevna Nesmeyana

looking straight into his eyes. He wanted to disappear, but where? The clouds suddenly parted, the sun shone in his eyes, he felt all confused and fell, smack into a puddle!

As if out of thin air, the Catfish-with-a-Big-Moustache, along with the Beetle-Old-Man and the Mouse-with-a-Sleek Coat, all hurried up to the embarrassed fellow! They hustled and they bustled with an air of gravity and industry. The mouse brushed the dust off the worker's coat, the beetle polished his shoes to a shine, and the catfish swatted away flies from his face with his long whiskers.

The tsarevna watched riveted, her eyes never leaving the scene. She looked at the mouse, the beetle and the catfish attending to the fool in a puddle, and burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed, unable to stop.

As her laughter rang through the palace, the tsar asked everyone gathered around. 'Who made my daughter laugh?' he demanded to know.

'It was I,' said someone in the crowd.

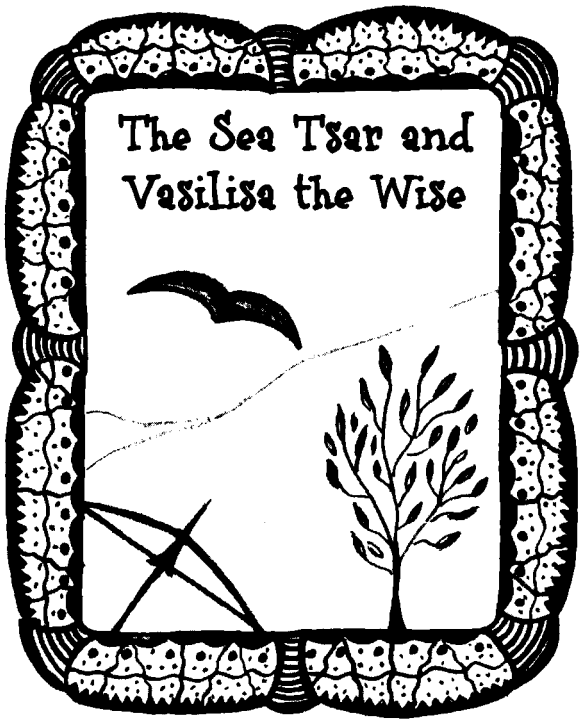
'No, it was I,' yelled another.

'It was neither,' said Tsarevna Nesmeyana. 'It was the man out there,' she said pointing to the worker.

The honest man was immediately ushered into the palace, and as he stood before the tsar, he looked as brave and dashing as the best of them.

'Well done!' The tsar congratulated him and gave him his now ever-smiling daughter in marriage.

Dear readers, everything narrated here is true. Believe me, it really happened and is not a figment of the poor worker's imagination!



Once there raged a great battle between the tsar of birds, the Eagle, and the tsar of beasts, the Lion. The Eagle, aided by his brave winged warriors, lay to waste the beast army. But victory came at a high cost, and many able avian soldiers were lost. The Eagle himself suffered dreadful wounds and withdrew to an ancient oak to nurse them.

In this land ruled a tsar who was very fond of hunting, and one day he came to the very oak tree upon which rested the Eagle. Seeing the regal bird perched

on a branch, its eyes half-shut, he aimed his arrow to shoot. As he readied to release the bowstring, the bird spoke, 'Don't shoot me, good tsar. I am weak from my injuries. Take me home and feed me. When I am strong, I will do you a good deed in return.'

The tsar reflected for a while, then lifted his bow to shoot. Once more the Eagle begged him to spare his life and once more the tsar hesitated. When he pleaded the third time, the tsar, feeling sorry for him, yielded and spared him.

'Give him a horse to perch on,' he ordered his men, 'and lead him to the palace. Tend to his wounds and give him meat and grain to eat and water and honey to drink!'

A year passed. The Eagle ate and drank in large quantities, vastly diminishing the tsar's cattle count and his granary stocks.

One day, he asked the tsar to take him to the forest. He flapped his enormous wings, gave a short burst into the sky but soon came hurtling down. Then they went back to the palace.

A second year passed. The Eagle ate and drank away the tsar's cattle and grain. One day, they went to an open meadow. The Eagle spread his wings, did cartwheels in the sky, and feeling dizzy and weak, fell down. So they returned to the palace.

Now there was neither an ox nor sheep, nor a grain of wheat left to eat. The tsar ordered all his subjects to provide food for the Eagle.

The third year passed. The Eagle felt strong at last and went to the clearing in the forest with the tsar again. This time, he shot to the sky and disappeared from view. As he climbed higher and higher and unleashed his mighty strength, a cyclone stirred in the ocean and the earth rumbled deep inside.

'I am finally ready,' the Eagle joyfully told the tsar. 'I wish to return to my kingdom now. Come with me.'

The tsar agreed, and the next morning the two set forth.

They flew for many hours, over mountains and plains, valley and deserts, and finally reached the Eagle's kingdom.

'Now listen carefully. My sisters will offer you many gifts for saving my life. Don't take anything. Ask the youngest for her copper spoon, the middle for her silver locket and the eldest for her gold jewellery box,' the Eagle said.

The tsar agreed. When they landed on the ground below, the Eagle turned into a gallant youth.

His sisters ran out to meet them with tears in their eyes. 'O dear brother!' they said, kissing and embracing him. 'We thought you were dead. Come, let us rejoice

and feast and sing and dance to celebrate your return.'

'Dear sisters, this man saved my life,' said the Eagle, introducing them to the tsar. 'For three years he fed me till I was strong again. Look after him well.'

For many days, there were joyous celebrations held in honour of the tsar. After a while, the Eagle and the tsar longing for his home, decided to head back. Before leaving, he took the copper spoon, the silver locket, and the little gold jewellery box from the sisters.

'Farewell, and god speed, good friend,' said the Eagle. 'Take my sisters' gifts home carefully. When you reach, place the copper spoon on a plate in the granary, the silver locket in your fields, and the gold jewellery box in the meadow beside your palace. Till then keep them hidden and don't take them out.' The tsar promised to do exactly as he was told, and they parted ways.

It was a long journey home by land. One day, the tsar was passing through a remote land, and when he reached the sea he decided to rest by its shores. Unable to resist his curiosity he held the jewellery box in his hands and opened it for a tiny peek. As soon as he did so, a huge palace shimmered in the air and solidified. Servants marched out and started serving the tsar with food and wine. The tsar didn't know what to do. How was he to put them all back into the box?

Suddenly from the sea rose a high wave and

rushed toward him. As the wave reached him it stood quite still. From deep within the wave, an angry voice thundered, 'I am the Morzkoi Tsar, Lord of the Sea! Who gave you permission to build a palace on my shores? Pack up your palace and leave now, or a watery grave will be your fate!'

The tsar was very frightened. He wanted to leave, but how was he to put a palace back into a box?

As he stood hesistantly, the voice spoke again. 'Leave this instant,' it boomed.

Black storm clouds gathered and the walls of water bent down to swallow up the tsar. He felt trapped.

'Let me go, Tsar Morzkoi, I beg your pardon. Take anything, but spare my life,' he cried.

'I will free you on one condition. Give me that which you know not is in your house.'

The tsar thought and thought. What is it that he had at home that he didn't know of? He knew of every hammered nail, every wooden beam and stone. He agreed.

The storm suddenly abated, the walls receded and the palace disappeared.

'I have packed your palace into the box. Go now and don't forget your promise or I will be very angry!' thundered Tsar Morzkoi.

When he reached home, the tsar's wife ran out

to meet him with the joyous news that she had given birth to a son and had named him Ivan. The tsar was very happy. For years they had yearned for a child and God had finally blessed them. Then it suddenly came to him he had not known of his son when he had promised the Sea Tsar. Oh no! What had he done? The Sea Tsar had tricked him! He had robbed him of his son! He fell to the ground and began to weep. When he calmed down, he told the queen all that had happened since he left with the Eagle up to the meeting with the merciless Sea Tsar.

They grieved together, but no one can weep forever. At last they returned to their normal lives. The tsar remembered the Eagle's gifts and one by one they did as he had instructed.

From the copper spoon came so much grain that it overflowed the granary, from the silver pendant a huge herd of sheep and oxen marched out, and from the gold box a new palace.

Many years went by. Their son grew up as all children do, by the hour, into a fine young man. His parents loved him deeply.

One day, the tsar had a dream in which he saw an agitated sea. A terrible voice shouted, 'You have a debt to pay, Tsar. Give me your son before it's too late.'

When day broke, the tsar thought, 'I have held on

to my son for many years. The Sea Tsar will not spare me this time if I do not honour my promise. What should I do?'

He told his son everything.

'Do not worry, Father,' said Tsarevich Ivan. I will go to the Sea Tsar and help you keep your promise. Maybe he will listen when I ask him to let me go.'

The tsar nodded sadly and telling him to go to the seashore bade him goodbye.

Ivan set forth. He walked and walked.

Suddenly from nowhere an old woman appeared and stood before Ivan.

'Where are you going?' she asked Ivan.

'Go away, old hag. Leave me alone!' snapped the tsarevich, impatient to be on his way.

The old woman moved aside and walked away.

'Why did I curse the old woman?' thought Ivan. 'Old people are wise! Perhaps she wanted to give me a piece of good advice.'

'Please, come back, babushka! Forgive my foolish words! I've offended you because I am very vexed. The Morzkoi Tsar tricked my father and now I am on my way to meet him.'

'Don't fret Tsarevich Ivan,' she said. 'I've heard from the trees and birds that Morzkoi Tsar is very angry these days. He waits for you impatiently and is in a boiling

rage. Go to the seashore down there. Hide behind a currant bush and wait. When the sun is bright, twelve geese will fly by. They will land on the shore and become beautiful maidens. They are rusalkas, Tsar Morzkoi's daughters, and their beauty is legendary. When they go into the water for a swim, steal Vasilisa's dress. You will know which one, for it will have a deep red sash around its waist. She is the tsar's eldest and also the wisest and kindest. Don't let go of her dress till she makes you a promise to help. Follow my instructions, and soon on your streets there will be celebrations!'

Ivan thanked the woman and went on his way. He crossed a wide plain, and finally reached the sea stretching into infinity before him.

He hid behind the currant bush and waited for the rusalkas to arrive. Soon they came, flying straight for the shore. As they gently hit the earth, one by one, they turned into maidens. Each was more ravishing than the other. But oh! The eldest one with a red sash—no pen can describe her beauty! They shrugged off their clothes and ran into the water, where they sang songs, laughed, splashed and played for hours.

Ivan remembered the old woman's instructions and sneaking up, he managed to take the dress that belonged to the eldest maiden.

The rusalkas emerged from the sea, wore their

clothes, and one by one changed into a goose and took to the air again. Vasilisa kept searching for her missing dress and was left all alone.

'He who has taken my dress, please appear!' she said after a while, looking around. 'If you are an old man you will be my father. If you are a middle-aged man you will be my brother. If you are a person of the same age as me I will make you my dear friend!'

As soon as she said these words, Tsarevich Ivan came forward.

'Ah! Tsarevich Ivan, where have you been all this time? My father, the Sea King, is very angry with you! Look, I will tell you how you get to the underwater kingdom and once you're there I promise to help you.' So saying, Vasilisa the Wise struck the ground, turned into a white goose and flew away.

Ivan was satisfied with this vow and did as he was told. He swam to the middle of the sea, waves lashed at him repeatedly and unable to withstand the onslaught any longer, he let himself go.

When he awoke, he found himself on a huge bed, in what looked like an opulent palace made entirely of crystal. He looked through the window and was very surprised to see that everything here was similar to his kingdom: the sun shone brightly, throwing light on green fields and meadows.

A servant entered with royal robes and said the tsar wanted to meet him immediately.

'You took your time in coming,' thundered the Morzkoi Tsar when he saw Ivan. 'You will be punished for your tardiness. Here's your first task. By tomorrow, I want a crystal bridge ready or your head will be on the block.'

Ivan didn't know what to do. He walked from room to room as if in a trance, when suddenly a door opened and Vasilisa walked toward him.

'Why do you look so stricken, Tsarevich? Is something worrying you?'

'O Vasilisa, your father just called me and commanded me to build a crystal bridge by tomorrow. If I fail, he has promised I will die. I am lost. I've never held an axe in my hands. How will I ever craft a crystal bridge?'

'Is that all?' asked Vasilisa in amazement. 'Go, rest in your room. Everything will be all right, the morning is wiser than the night.'

Ivan went away, and Vasilisa gave a piercing whistle. From every corner appeared an army of workers. They got to work, bringing crystals, levelling, chiselling and cutting and, when dawn broke, they all dispersed home.

Vasilisa went to Ivan and gently shook him awake.

'Hurry, wake up, Tsarevich! The bridge is ready! My father will be coming to inspect it shortly.'

Ivan leapt out of bed, and rushing to the bridge grabbed a broom and started sweeping, trying to look as though he had worked all night long and was now giving finishing touches.

The tsar was mighty impressed with the bridge and said, 'Well done, Tsarevich. This test you pass. But here's another task! I have a field not far from the palace. It is thirty versts long and wide. It is covered with ditches, gullies and sharp stones. Make it as smooth as my palm, scatter on it seeds of rye, and by morning, I want ripe, golden rye growing on it. If you fail, your head will roll off your shoulders!'

As soon as the tsar was out of sight, Ivan sat down with his head in both hands.

'Why are your brows so furrowed, Tsarevich?' called out Vasilisa from the window of her tower up high.

'Your father wants me to plant rye from seed, and have tall plants swaying all golden in the morning breeze!' replied Ivan morosely.

'That's all? Go now to your room and rest. Morning is wiser than night.'

When he was gone, Vasilisa the Wise loudly cried, 'My faithful servants, appear! Level the field, smoothen the ditches, gullies and sharp stones. Sow rye, and

remember, in the morning it should be tall and ripe.'

As dawn approached, Vasilisa awoke Ivan. He threw his bedclothes off and scrammed. He rode to the field and seized the first tool—a watering can—that came to his hand, and began to sprinkle the field here and there.

'Wonderful Ivan, you are a talented man and a worthy suitor in my eyes,' said the tsar. 'Select a bride for yourself from among my twelve daughters. But remember, you have to pick out the same one thrice in a row. If you fail, I shall have your head.'

Vasilisa the Wise overheard her father. She summoned him to the garden and told him what he must do.

She said, 'Tsarevich Ivan, to pick the same girl three times in a row, here's what you must do. The first time over, pick the maiden who will wave a kerchief. The second time, choose the one tucking away a curl. And, finally, select the one over whose head will buzz a bee. All three, you see, will be me.'

Ivan was overjoyed. He loved Vasilisa and wanted her to be his bride. But when the moment came, he got a case of nerves. All the girls stood in line, their faces veiled. One mistake and Ivan knew he would die.

'It's time,' roared the tsar.

Ivan looked at all the girls, very bewildered. Then

he saw a white handkerchief flutter. 'Her,' he pointed. 'She's who I want.'

The girls then shuffled their positions while Ivan turned around. When they were ready, Ivan faced them once again.

He stared and stared, his palms sweaty, then suddenly from the corner of his eye, he saw one girl softly tuck a curl behind her ear. 'That's her, she's the one I choose!' he shouted.

The tsar was not too pleased. For Ivan had guessed correctly this time. And if he succeeded once more, the tsar would lose his eldest daughter, his favourite Vasilisa, to a man from an alien land.

Again the girls switched their positions and stood waiting for Ivan to make his final decision. Again he stared at the maidens' shadowy faces, trying hard to remember the last hint. There was pin-drop silence in the room as all awaited. Ivan's life hung in the balance; now it was only a matter of seconds. Somewhere a maddening bee was buzzing, Ivan swished it off his face, and the tsar indicated to his servant to swat it. That was the last clue! Oh no! Quickly, the bee flew over the head of a maiden, hovered for a few seconds then flew out of the window. Ivan pointed to his final pick. Yes, thank heavens it was the right one!

He made a formal proposal and Vasilisa accepted.

She was his best friend—he owed her his life and now his heart. Both were ecstatic and the tsar got them wed.

They lived in Tsar Morzkoi's palace for a while, but Ivan grew sadder and sadder with each passing day.

'What's the matter, Tsarevich? Don't you like it here?' asked Vasilisa one day.

'I miss my mother and father and my beloved land.'

'It's difficult to leave the sea kingdom now. If we try to escape, my father will chase and kill us both. We must make a very clever plan if we want to get out in one piece!' said Vasilisa the Wise, and spat in three corners.

Then they locked the door and ran away.

The next day, Tsar Morzkoi sent a servant to Vasilisa's chamber. He knocked at the door to awaken the couple.

'Wake up, the Sea King wants to see you!' he shouted.

'It's very early. We want to sleep! Come later!' said the first saliva. The messengers went away.

An hour later, another messenger came and knocked at the door. 'It's time to wake up! It's time to wake up!' he cried.

'Wait a little! What's the hurry? We will get up when we are ready!' replied the second saliva.

The servant went away. Soon more returned and tried to awaken the couple for the third time.

'We will come out in a minute!' exclaimed the third saliva.

The servants waited a little and then knocked again. At last they broke open the door and came in. The chamber was empty. They hurried back to Tsar Morskoi and reported that his daughter and Ivan Tsarevich were gone.

The tsar was furious. 'Pursue them now!' he shouted.

Tsarevich Ivan and Vasilisa the Wise had travelled afar by then. They were riding swift steeds and didn't stop to rest for even a minute.

'Jump off your horse, Ivan, and lay your ear on the earth,' Vasilisa commanded urgently. 'What do you hear?'

Ivan fell on the ground and began to listen. 'I hear the clatter of horses and people's voices!' he exclaimed.

'My father's servants are pursuing us,' said Vasilisa the Wise.

They stopped, and Vasilisa turned their steeds into a meadow, Ivan into an old shepherd, and herself into a sheep.

Soon the Sea King's servants arrived at a gallop. 'Grandfather, have you seen a lad with a maiden?' they asked the old shepherd.

'No, I haven't seen anybody,' replied Ivan.

The servants galloped back to the palace. 'Your Majesty, we pursued your daughter and Tsarevich Ivan, but they are nowhere to be found. We even asked an old shepherd grazing his sheep on a meadow, but he had not seen them around,' they said to the Sea King.

'You fools! Vasilisa was the sheep and Ivan the shepherd. Return to where you saw them and get them this time!' raged the Sea King.

Meanwhile Tsarevich Ivan and Vasilisa the Wise had galloped far on their horses.

'Tsarevich Ivan, jump off your horse and lay your ear to the ground!' said Vasilisa. 'What do you hear?'

Ivan fell on the ground and said, 'I hear the clatter of hooves and people's voices!'

'My father's servants are pursuing us again!' said Vasilisa. She turned their steeds into trees, Ivan into a priest, and herself into a church.

The pursuers soon approached.

'Hey there, Batyushka! Have you seen a shepherd with his sheep?' they asked.

'No, good people, I have not seen them,' replied Ivan. 'I have worked in this church for close to forty years now, and in all this time, not one bird has flown close, not one beast has strayed near!'

The servants returned to the palace.

'Your Majesty, we couldn't find the shepherd or

the sheep. We even asked an old priest in a church,' they reported.

'Why didn't you break down the church? Why didn't you hold the priest? It was them—my daughter and Tsarevich Ivan!' screamed the Sea King, and losing patience with his incompetent staff, decided to catch the fugitives himself.

By this time, Vasilisa the Wise and Tsarevich Ivan were about to cross over the border of the underwater kingdom.

'Tsarevich Ivan, jump off your steed and lay your ear to the ground,' said Vasilisa. 'What do you hear?'

'I hear the thundering of hooves louder than ever!' he exclaimed.

'We must hurry up! My father himself is pursuing us!' exclaimed Vasilisa the Wise.

The Sea King was very close now. Just as he caught up with them, they crossed into Ivan's kingdom, and suddenly a gigantic eagle appeared beside them and said, 'Quick, hold my wings and climb on my back; I am an old friend of your father and I will reach you safely to him.'

They clambered aboard and held on tight, and the Eagle zoomed up in the sky. The Morzkoi Tsar saw them go, but there was nothing he could do. As they climbed higher, they saw him standing below by his horse, a

mere speck on the ground.

The Sea King had no choice but to gallop back to his palace.

When Vasilisa the Wise and Tsarevich Ivan reached the palace, Ivan's parents ran out to meet them. They all hugged and kissed. The Eagle and the tsar too had a joyful reunion. There were celebrations on the streets, just as the old woman had predicted!

And they all lived in good health and good cheer and prospered more and more with each passing year.

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there lives a witch called Baba Yaga, a prince by the name of Ivan, a serpent with twelve heads that plunges the land into darkness, a wood sprite that talks to the moon, a feather that becomes a prince when it touches the ground, a princess who has magic at her fingertips, a terrifying sorcerer who cannot be killed ...

In this land, riddles have to be solved, perilous worlds ventured into, heroic feats performed, disasters averted, before the prince, princesses, or even ordinary folk, can find true love and live happily ever after.

This book leads you into that land by bringing to you some of its best-loved tales—the Russian folktales. Sometimes dark, often funny, heart-warming and full of adventure, they will entertain young and old alike.

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